Woodland Creek
EVER COMING
RIDING HER
UNICORN

Riding Her Unicorn

A BBW Shifter Romance

By Ever Coming

WOODLAND CREEK

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Edited by Melanie Williams
Cover by Jennifer Munswami J.M RISING HORSE CREATIONS

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Once Upon A Time

Once upon a time there was a girl. She was intelligent, compassionate, kind, and lonely. She was also a jaguar, but her jaguar had long since given up on her. Her jaguar stayed hidden in the background and left the girl lonely. Jaguar shifters always had the company of their inner animal, so their solitary nature was far less solitary than it would appear to the humans they lived among.

The girl tried to fill the void. She broke family tradition and went to college in a predominantly human university where she became the perfect student. She joined a sorority, the school newspaper, and the student counsel. Her emptiness remained.

The girl then decided to try dating. Certainly making a connection with another person at that level would fill the void. She was wrong. She dated, and by dated, meaning fucked all kinds of guys. Nice Guys. Business men. Gym Rats. Musicians. Heck, she even gave a blowjob to an artist at his gallery opening. Where other girls played it demure and pushed their sexuality down, this girl explored it all. She might not be beautiful by societal standards, given her extra curviness, but she knew how to work those curves, and men responded.

The woman wouldn't lie. She loved sex, but all the writhing sweaty fun ended once the orgasmic high faded. At the end of the day she was still completely, utterly, alone. She wanted, no needed more.

Amber looked at the words she had written. They were true, every last one of them. And she was ready to leave that part of her life behind. No longer would she be the lonely girl searching to find completeness. She was going to become whole. Rumor had it that Woodland Creek held the answers for her. No longer would she try to fill the void on her own. She was going to get her jaguar back.

Throwing the writing onto the fire in front of her, she watched it burn. Symbolically, she was leaving that girl behind. More importantly, she was going to fix what was broken and be the jaguar she knew she should and could be. No longer was she going to allow herself to settle. Whatever it took, she would do.

Putting on her backpack, she climbed onto the back of her motorcycle and headed to the place she hoped held all of the answers: Woodland Creek.

Pack Rat Central

"Stay!" Amber yelled in vain at the mound of papers and books toppling over the side of the table. "I told you to effing stay …" fell from her lips as she crumpled to the floor. After three days of sorting through the cabin, it still looked just as, if not more, disorganized than it had three days earlier when she had first begun.

Amber wasn't sure why she *had* to organize her late mentor's cabin, but she did. It was beyond a compulsion at this point. She was on a mission. To what end? That, she hadn't figured out yet. Quite honestly, the first time Amber entered Rosemary's cabin, it had been just as much of a disaster. The old woman seemed to like living among the clutter. Piles of books here. Piles of papers, there. Herbs hanging everywhere. There was no doubt in Amber's mind that if the fire inspector ever saw this place, he would deem it a fire hazard.

Amber had never minded the clutter before Rosemary passed. This little cabin hidden in the woods had felt more like home to her than anywhere else she had lived. Now, however, she felt an urgency to get it organized and clutter free. Amber knew she was falling into her old self comfort strategies, but she had to. Stopping to think about all she had lost was too much.

Amber had originally come to Woodland Creek hoping to find her jaguar. Her jaguar was in there, she could now feel it, but she never came to the forefront. Amber could and did shift, but she was simply a human in a costume. The Jaguar in her stayed dormant. No jaguar senses. No jaguar instincts. No jaguar. Period. She was just a human running around in fur.

Rumor had it that the woods in Woodland Creek held more secrets than the FBI, and that one of those secrets was a Unicorn Healer named Rosemary. Unicorn Healers had been thought by many to be the stuff of fairy tales, humans thinking that made sense. They often dismissed anything they couldn't understand or explain away with science. As for the rest of everyone, Amber never really understood. They knew people could shift and that wizards and witches were real. Why was it such a stretch that unicorns could heal? Not that the unicorns did themselves any PR favors. They basically stayed to themselves.

Rosemary was a perfect example of that. Once Amber had arrived at Woodland Creek on her barely working, piece of garbage, *this is all you can buy with wheels and a motor for three hundred dollars* motorcycle, it had taken her six days to find Rosemary. Everyone in town seemed to know who the old woman was, but no one seemed to know what she was or where she lived. The only thing people seemed to know was that the woman would come into Old Town to pick up things from Krieg's every couple of weeks. They all agreed she was a "nice old lady" but had nothing else to say about her. Amber couldn't be certain, but she didn't get the sense that any of them knew that Rosemary was anything other than human.

Amber had been quickly spending the last of what little money she had at Two Creeks Inn. Patty,

the owner, was a nice enough lady and her rates were fair, but Amber had been living paycheck to paycheck before she decided to take charge of her life and fix her inner jaguar. That meant her savings was zilch, and after selling all of her things, she had enough for her crappy motorcycle and a bit of money to get her to Woodland Creek.

Amber had assumed that finding Rosemary would be easier than it had turned out to be. After all, she had overheard a shifter mention her in the bar she used to work at. If the old woman was famous enough to be chatted about three states away in a predominantly human establishment, surely her own town knew about her. Once again, Amber was wrong. It seemed to be a constant in her life.

Goodness, even Patty didn't seem to know about Rosemary, and she seemed to be the town gossip. Amber had heard far more about who was sleeping with whom and whose eyes wandered where than she had ever wanted to. Patty loved to talk, and if it wasn't gossip, it was about her cats. Poor Patty was the epitome of every inn keeper cliché Amber had ever heard.

Every day, Amber grabbed a cup of Geek Beans coffee and sat on the bench outside of Krieg's like a good old stalker. Back in her old town, if she had done that, she would have most definitely been, at the very least questioned, about her odd behavior. The police would have assumed she was either a homeless derelict or a drug dealer. Here in Woodland Creek, there were so many secrets, you could see them floating around. It was probably why people left her alone. They didn't want people prying into their lives, so they in return didn't pry.

By day six, she had only two more days' worth of money left for her room at the inn, but she was not going to think about that. In her gut, she knew this was where she was supposed to be. It had to be. She refused to give up and live a completely empty and lonely life. She deserved more than that. Thankfully, that was the day she met Rosemary.

Rosemary seemed to know that Amber was there for her and instead of going into the store, she took a seat beside her, telling her that she had things to pick up and then they would be on their way home. She gave Amber a side hug before instructing her to meet her back there in a half an hour and going into the small store as if nothing interesting had occurred.

Amber had not even gotten in a word other than "Hi." Without hesitation she ran back to Two Creeks Inn, checked out, and was back at Kreig's. It had been no wonder why no one in town knew where the old woman lived. She was in the woods, as many a shifter preferred, but Rosemary used her gift of illusion to hide her cabin. Apparently, even in a town as filled with shifters and other non-humans as Woodland Creek was, it still was not safe for a unicorn. The false rumors of power that could be obtained by procuring a unicorn horn were still rampant.

That had been six months ago, and while Amber hadn't found her jaguar, she had found a home. Rosemary welcomed her with open arms and took her in as an apprentice. Amber was pleased that she had a knack for healing and as a result she and Rosemary had become very close. They sold their cures online as *natural cures* under the guise of a small mom and pop crunchy medicine store. The once a month shipping policy had kept business slow, but all of their customers came back. It was plenty to keep the cabin going, but now that Rosemary was gone, Amber was not only feeling the loneliness even deeper than before she arrived, but she was also on borrowed time.

This cabin was not hers. The business was not hers. Nothing here, other than a small backpack, a broken motorcycle, and a drawer half filled with clothes, was hers. All of the rest belonged to Rosemary's relative, whomever that may be. Police Chief Rickman promised to find her relatives to let them know she was gone. He told her until they came forward she was fine staying at the home since it had been her home too. Amber wondered if that was simply because he had no idea where the cabin was.

It had been two weeks since Rosemary was hit by the drunk driver. No amount of healing could have saved her. The jackass who hit her walked away without a scratch. He had been actually drinking while driving straight from a bottle of cheap vodka. From what the police told her, he was a human on his way through town to get to a lover, who had been lovers with a few extra people while visiting friends in Indianapolis. He was so drunk that as Amber watched him swerve and hit Rosemary head on as she stood on the side of the road waiting to cross, Amber thought he had hit her on purpose. Nope, his eyes were so fucking blurry that he thought he was swerving around her. If only she had been closer, maybe she could have pushed her friend out of the way. Instead they had split their errands up that day and fate took Rosemary from her.

There was no funeral for Rosemary; although, the police chief mentioned something about a town meeting. Not to be left out, Patty was there to see what all the hoopla was about. She made a side comment about the meeting being a hunting party and not to worry about being there for a trial. Good old fashioned shifter justice seemed to be the drunkard's fate, and Amber was more than fine with that. She only wished she was included because she had enough rage in her that day to take him down on her own. That was probably why she was left out. It was probably for the best. Without her jaguar, she would have all the human emotions a kill would normally face, and that would never set will.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Amber stood up. "Well, fuck this wallowing. It is time to get this place as good as new." Walking around the table she began to pick up the papers that had just fallen everywhere. The only place in the cabin that was usually clutter free was the table, and now that Amber had gone into mission organize mode, it was no longer a clean space. She would, at the minimum, need to get it cleared off by the morning. She had orders to fill. There was no way she was going to allow the business Rosemary had worked so hard to build fall apart before her relatives showed up—if they showed up. The sheriff had not been too forth coming on that one.

The papers and books in this pile were mostly recipes for salves, powders, and teas. Those were the ones that were most important because they were the cornerstone of the business. Forget this, Amber needed a better method. These piles were just not working. She needed to create a working system. She swore she would never go back to her overachieving organized ways. She lied. This project called for a set of filing boxes, file folders, and a label maker.

Grabbing her backpack, she headed into town. They didn't really have the kind of store she needed in town, but with her motorcycle not working, she would have to make do. The university bookstore should have most of what she needed, and she had to pass Geek Beans on the way. Well, not really, but she was going to because she needed a coffee fix if she was going to walk as much as it looked like she would today.

What's a Kiss Between Strangers?

The university had more than what she could have hoped for. They even had stackable plastic file boxes. She was in heaven. Of course, she also had her arms full, and between the boxes, which thankfully nested easily, and the other supplies, her arms were tired well before she had even gotten to the woods. Screw this, she was stopping for a burger at Drakes for an early lunch. Might as well fuel up and give her arms a rest.

Drakes was hopping, even during this in between meal time. Leave it to her to decide to stop by during *family weekend* at the university. The place was filled with college students milking their parents for a free meal of yummy goodness. Amber dropped her box outside the front doorway and went in to order a burger and shake to go. She could cop a squat on the edge of the woods. She would be closed to home, and frankly after having lived in solitude for the past six months, she had grown to prefer it. Even now as the loneliness was growing, being in a crowded room made her feel twice as lonely.

"Just jump in a seat when one opens up." The waitress didn't even stop as she said the words. The poor girl looked beyond frazzled. Who could blame her, the place was packed.

Walking up to the register, Amber grabbed a menu and started to look through it. She always looked at the menu, but at the end always decided on a cheeseburger, no onions, a side of onion rings, and a chocolate malt. The normal waitress always teased her about having onion rings after ordering no onions, prompting them to banter back and forth about the difference between cooked and raw onions. There would be no banter today. In fact, from the sounds coming from the kitchen, her waitress was actually the fry cook today.

"A seat opened up at the counter." Once again the waitress walked by. If she was going to get food, she was probably going to have to have a seat. She scanned the counter and found the vacant spot. On one side was a college kid clearly sporting a hangover eating with his oblivious parents and on the other side was a hot guy. No, hot didn't come close to describing him and she hadn't even gotten a decent look yet. At least her new spot had a good view.

Amber squeezed herself onto the stool. She hated sitting at the counter; her butt was too big and her legs were too short. They were clearly designed by a tall skinny dude with no ass. She bumped into the hottie as she twisted to face forward. Just wonderful.

"Sorry," she mumbled not looking at him. She was leaving her flirty *fill the void with sex* ways behind. Rosemary being gone was not going to change that. There was a better way. There had to be.

"No, it was my fault. I turned around to watch your beauty as you sat beside me. It is I who should be apologizing." His voice was rich and husky. She didn't doubt his words. He was interested in her. Well, her body, at least.

Fuck it. A little flirty fun was not going to have her fall back into her old ways.

Turning to face him, her eyes locked with his cerulean blue orbs. She couldn't look away. Heck, she didn't want to look away.

"I'm Amber." She lamely held out her hand, never breaking eye contact.

His hand slipped in hers and the warmth traveled up her arms. She had been so long without the touch of a man, she had all but forgotten how it felt. He squeezed it instead of the standard shake. "I'm Jason."

"Ready to order?" The spell was broken by the waitress. She would normally be mad at the waitress's obvious inability to see she was interrupting, but the same ineptitude to see what a customer needed had Amber in this seat in the first place, so the woman was completely forgiven.

Dropping his hand, Amber turned to face the girl. "Umm, yeah. A cheeseburger, medium rare with no onions, a side of onion rings and a chocolate malt. To go, please."

"To go?" Jason inquired, his voice sounding almost disappointed.

"Umm," she turned to face him, "yeah. I have a pile of things outside, so I was going to have a picnic."

"Things?" Jason placed his hand on her knee. Rational thought left her.

"Yeah, some file boxes, folders, pens, those kinds of things." Yeah, she sounded super sexy now. Nothing a guy likes better than office supply talk.

"We could put them in the back of my truck so you don't have to worry about them." Jason's offer was a gentlemanly one, but his voice was so oozing with sex appeal that he might as well have been asking to strip her naked, lay her on the counter, and feast from her pussy as an appetizer the way her panties became instantly soaked.

"Yeah." Darn it. Good thing the man wasn't a shifter or he would surely smell the effect he had on her. Not that her staring and lack of words while blushing was hiding it very well.

"Amber is eating here. Please hold mine until hers is ready." His voice was different with the waitress—more friendly and normal, and far less sexy and smoldering. Amber squared her shoulders. There was something intoxicating about having that effect on a man, even if it was fleeting.

"It won't taste as good if I leave it under the heat light." The waitress was right on that one. It would go from yummy goodness to gas station food in only a few minutes.

"It will be fine." The waitress nodded in agreement, probably because it was far too busy to argue. "Well, let's go get your *things*." The slight teasing was nice. Before today, she hadn't really talked to anyone since the accident. It was refreshing. He grabbed her hand and helped her from her seat. "Hopefully, no one will think these are vacant," he mumbled to hangover boy as he handed him what looked like a ten dollar bill.

"They won't, sir." The kid's eyes lit up at the money. There was no way that Jason was a *sir*—well, maybe in the *I have a master and am tied to the bed* kind of way, but not in the traditional way. Amber guessed that Jason was twenty-sevenish. Hardly sir material.

"Thank you." Jason led her by the hand through the crowd and out the door. A line was now formed in the entrance way, and she could see the glimmer in their eyes hoping there was space at the counter. It was a good thing Jason had paid the kid. They would have definitely lost their spot.

Outside she took the lead over to where she had dropped her bounty. She dropped his hand and bent down to gather the boxes only to have him reach them first. Such the gentleman. Although, quite frankly there was nothing gentlemanly about the things she wanted him to do to her.

"I got it." His sexy voice was back. "My truck is around the back. This place is crowded for a small town."

"Yeah, family weekend at the college." She purposely let him get in front of her. She had to see

his ass in those jeans. It did not disappoint.

She had to focus not to have her hand reach over to it and give it a squeeze. Screw that, she wanted a two hand squeeze that worked its way around to the front. It was official, she was back to horny girl; although, this time it wouldn't be to fill the void. She knew that never worked. This time it would be just to save herself from carpal tunnel. She could see the doctor's diagnosis now: Carpal Tunnel caused by over masturbation.

"It's right over here." Jason turned to look over his shoulder. Darn bastard caught her staring, and from the smirk on his face, he liked it.

"How do I know you are not a serial killer leading me into your web?" Her voice was light. She had no fear of this man, but if this had been a horror movie, she would have either been thrown into the back of a van or stabbed by now.

"Oh, I am no serial killer. For that matter, I'm not a spider either." He stopped at the back of a black truck with a camper shell and Oregon plates. "I am not denying that like a spider, I may want to eat you, though." Darn man had her on fire again, all with a very poorly worded innuendo. Jason held the box in one hand and popped open the tailgate and back with the other, easily sliding it in before closing it.

"Would you like that?" He was now standing in front of her, his face only inches from hers. She was so lost in breaking down his words that she missed his movement.

"Like what?" She swallowed sending up a quick prayer to the lust gods that he was talking about eating her out and not something else she had missed in her lust-filled haze.

"Like me to." He leaned his head in close. His lips so close to her ear that she could feel the warmth of his breath. "Eat you."

She nodded absent mindedly. All words escaped her. Fuck it, they had a few minutes before lunch would be ready. Heck, with that crowd, they probably had a good fifteen minutes. Not enough time to do all she wanted, but surely enough time to take the edge off.

She took the half a step between them and cupped him with her hand, leaving no doubt what she had in mind. Her hand couldn't come close to covering his length, which was harder than steel. Oh yeah, he felt it too.

She was turned around, back against the truck with his lips on hers before she realized she was in motion. Oh goodness, she had forgotten the high of a good kiss. It was all need and lust. Jason explored every inch of her mouth and she his. Lips, teeth, tongues. They were on a mission, and she melted into him, enjoying the ride. In another hour she would be back at the cabin sorting through piles of papers and trying to be all responsible.

Her hand began to work his button. As sexy as button fly jeans were, she would have loved a zipper about now. She wanted to taste him. Forget him eating her. He was going to be her pre-lunch treat. One. Two. Three buttons open when her hand was stopped by his.

"What?" she panted. Yes, panted.

"We are on the side of a diner." What? Was he trying to ruin the moment with facts? Screw that.

"So." She tried to pull her hand from his, but he was now lacing his fingers with hers.

"You live near here."

"So." She once again tried to resume her affections and he once again kept her from doing so. She wanted to growl, but then he would know she was a shifter and she still didn't know who he was or why he was in town. He might be *in the know* as townies called them, but if he wasn't, she didn't want to be the one facing consequences for sharing the nature of the town.

"People will see you and know what you are doing."

"So." She leaned her head back to look at him. He obviously felt they needed to stop for some reason and his erection told her that reason had nothing to do with lack of chemistry. She owed it to him to hear him out without grabbing his cock, no matter how much it called to her.

"They will talk."

"They will anyway." It was the truth. There were more gossips in Woodland Creek per capita than anywhere else she had ever been, and the problem was probably far more prevalent than even she knew, since she came to town only a few times a month. It is amazing what she learned in the grocery store picking out her produce. Rosemary teased that there were so many gossips because there were so many secrets. Amber wasn't sure about that, but her liaison was surely seen by someone and would become fodder for the town gossips.

"You deserve better." He pulled his hand from hers and began to button up his pants.

"They began the gossip the second I sat next to you, and you don't know me." Amber instantly regretted the anger that tinged her voice. "Sorry. I was all caught up in …" She took a step back and waved her hand in the air gesturing the space between them. "This ... Whatever this is."

"Oh, you know what this is." Jason moved in close, once again. "This is lust."

In response, her stomach growled because there is nothing sexier than hunger. "Sorry."

"Come. Our food is probably ready." He took her hand as they walked back to the front entrance. The diner was still full, but there were no longer people in the entrance way. "We can finish what we started after we eat," he added as they walked in. His smirk told her that he meant to state it just before they entered the crowded dining space, thus not allowing her to respond. Too bad he was traveling through and her days in the town were most likely numbered.

Hangover boy was gone, but in their places, he had left notes on the placemats saying, "These seats taken."

"Huh," Jason said, pointing to the placemats. "Guess we could have done that."

She sat on her stool and he on his as the waitress brought their food and her malt. From the condensation on the glass and the thinness of the malt, it had been ready for a while.

"Thanks," she said to the waitress as the sad looking burger was placed in front of her. Jason's plate looked even worse. "I guess we took longer than I thought," she mumbled as she picked up a wilting onion ring.

"It was worth it," Jason remarked, picking up his soggy BLT.

"Yeah, it really was." She smiled, giving him a knowing look.

"So, you from here?" Jason's hand landed on her jean clad knee, and she swore she could feel his heat instantly. The magic had not been broken by the crowded diner or the crappy food. Technically speaking, lust was not magic, but Amber had always thought of it as such. It had the ability to make all things disappear, even if only momentarily.

"No. I just got here about six months ago." She really didn't want to get into it all. Not that she felt guarded around him. For goodness sakes she had just tried numerous times to get her hand down his pants with the hopes of getting to suck him off. She just didn't want the rest of town to hear about her and Rosemary. There was already gossip that she was the bastard child of Rosemary's deceased husband coming for her inheritance. Idiots.

"Work?"

"Kind of." It hadn't been about work, but it turned into a career of sorts, so she didn't really feel as though she were lying. Although, honest was not how she would describe it either.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to pry." He took her standoffishness as her not wanting to open up to him, and while she knew they would never be more than a fling, that somehow hurt her.

"No, it's not you." She squeezed his hand, which had now traveled a few inches up her thigh. "It's just weird having a conversation as we are both facing the open kitchen and people are all around us, is all."

"Yeah it is. How about we leave these, grab some coffee from that Geek place and finish our chat picnic style?" She liked the sound of that, and the food was pretty wretched from sitting for so long.

She turned to face him. "Still not a serial killer?"

"No," he chuckled, "still not a serial killer." He raised his hand to signal the waitress for his check, and she did the same.

Jason grabbed both bills as they appeared on the counter. "I've got this. After all, it is my fault it was inedible."

"One could argue it was mine." She winked to leave no room to question if she was being serious or not.

"True. Maybe I should ask the waitress's opinion." She playfully slapped him on the shoulder. "Or I could just pay this and we can be on our way?"

"And I'll get the coffee." He just shook his head in mirth as he slapped some money at their place and helped her from her spot at the counter.

For the first time since Rosemary's accident, Amber was excited for something. True, it was only take away coffee, but a coffee and chat with a hottie would be nice. Especially if chat was code for orgasm.

Going *Down* by the River

"I should probably grab my boxes before we go. Geek Bean is on the way home, so it will save me some time." They walked hand in hand. It felt nice. Too nice.

"Or I could drive you to Geek Bean and then to your home." Geek bean was not far, but any distance without the boxes in her arms would be nice. Who knows? If she played her cards right, they might even be able to pick up where they left off earlier, only this time with a wee bit of privacy.

"To Geek Bean, absolutely, but not home. It is not really a drivable kind of homestead." There was no way she wanted to explain to him why he couldn't see her road or her cabin. She had no idea how long the illusion would hold up, but for now, it was solid.

"What do you mean?"

Crap, he was a persistent one. "It is pretty deep in the woods."

He opened up the passenger side door and helped her in. It was an older model truck, but that made the leather seats extra comfy and she wriggled in, enjoying the comfort after those stupid counter stools. She could have sworn she heard a small groan as he shut her door.

"Wait, are you saying you are camping?" He continued right where he left off the second his door was open and he was climbing in. He turned to face her in his seat, almost looking worried. Crap on a cracker, he thought she was nearly homeless.

"Oh no, it is a cabin. Running water, electricity, the internet, the whole nine yards." He didn't look like he totally believed her, so she quickly added, "No one uses file folders in a tent."

"But no driveway?" Now he looked less concerned and more confused. She just wanted to get to the coffee and orgasms, but he had to be all *nice* and *caring*. He cupped her cheek with his hand. For a quick second she could have sworn she felt her jaguar. Darn hormones were messing with her head.

"Not so much." It wasn't like she could tell him she had a driveway he would not be able to see.

"Is that why you are walking with all of these *things*?" He was still amused by her choice of words. She wanted to ask him what he would call them, but he had yet to start the truck, which meant she was still a good ten minutes away from her new afternoon goal. No way was she delaying that any further than necessary.

"I am walking because my motorcycle broke and I haven't gotten it fixed yet."

"Motorcycle. You were going to carry these on your motorcycle?" His thumb caressed her cheekbone, and she focused really hard on the question at hand instead of the really hard erection she was hoping to have him sporting in the near future.

"No. That would be crazy." As his thumb travelled to her lips, she gave it a quick nip before turning slightly. If she allowed him to continue on this path, she was going to jump him and from the

crash of the dumpster echoing in her ears, that was not the best idea. They most definitely had an audience. "If …" Her voice slightly cracked. Oh yeah, he knew he was turning her on. "… my motorcycle worked, I would have gotten the smaller cardboard boxes and put all of the *things* in my backpack instead of putting my backpack in the box."

"You are full of surprises, aren't you? My little biker chick." The lust returned in his eyes, full throttle. At least the conversation was going in the right direction.

"Hardly. It was cheap and mostly worked, so I bought it instead of a car." He was a stranger she was about to get hot and sweaty with, there was no reason for her to over share anything about money, yet out it came. She didn't want him thinking she was a biker chick when she was anything but. He might have eyes she wanted to get lost in and dimples that made her pussy weep for joy, but she wanted him to want her for her. Not that he knew her. She had to stop over thinking and just enjoy the afternoon distraction.

"Sticking with my original assessment. It is hotter."

She let out a giggle. Amber was not normally a giggler. There was something about this man. "Yeah, I guess it is." It's true, biker chicks were hot.

"My truck has four wheel drive." And they were back to that again. Mr. Persistent.

"I think it is best if I walk." The bluntness and harshness of her words felt bad coming out, so she quickly over compensated by plastering on a huge smile and running her hand up his arm. He was built beneath his plain grey t-shirt, and she planned to see just how built he was. She was also dying to know just what the tattoo barely showing over the top of his collar just now was.

"Do you walk alone all the time?" Was that worry in his voice? They had just met. Heck, she didn't even know his last name.

"Serial Killer Jason talking?" Amber hoped that adding the humor would lighten things back up.

"Nah, nice guy Jason talking." She believed him too. He was a nice guy. A nice guy wrapped in a freakin' hot bad boy body.

"Yeah, I do." His eyes fell. He didn't like that answer. Not one bit. "I used to have a roommate, but she is gone, so yeah. Don't worry, though. I can take care of myself."

"Oh, I know that. Jaguar or cougar?" Well that one question just made things more interesting. Amber was glad he knew. There was no part of her that questioned her safety around him, and it was nice to add one more layer to their connection.

"Well, it looks like I am not the only one full of surprises. I didn't realize you were *in the know*. Visiting, not passing through, I see." She had wondered why he would be passing through. It wasn't like Woodland Creek was en route to anywhere when your starting point is Oregon.

"Not sure if *in the know* is how I would explain it, but more taking care of some business than visiting." Working. Hmmm, that could mean he was there for a few days. She could work with that. "I actually had never been here before today. Maybe you can be my tour guide."

"I actually would be a crappy guide. I pretty much stick to myself."

"*Cougar* thing?" He was not subtle, that was sure. She had left him hanging, so it was fair.

"*Jaguar* thing, but no. More of an Amber thing." Jaguars were solitary to be sure, but they didn't act like hermits in the woods.

"You sure you want to carry this all the way home?" She grabbed his keys out of his hand and threw them on the dash. "I mean even if my truck is not going to fit, I can walk you. You know, be the dumb muscle."

"I seriously doubt you are dumb, but I got it." She leaned in, hoping for a kiss, but he grabbed the keys off the dash and put them in the ignition before putting on his seatbelt.

"We best go get that coffee. That way I can spend the next hour or so wooing you into letting me help you." He backed the truck out of the spot and began their short drive.

"Wooing? Seemed like you were busy avoiding wooing just now." Amber wanted to kick her own ass. She sounded like a needy, hurt, wannabe girlfriend instead of the strong young jaguar she knew she was.

"What I was doing," He grabbed her hand as they stopped at the stop sign and placed it in his lap—holy crap, he was bigger than she initially thought, "was avoiding our debut as exhibitionists in Drake's parking lot. I figure that having the waitress watching us while on her smoke break was not the best way to go about things."

"Oh." She had totally forgotten about their probable audience. If her jaguar was not in hiding, she would have warned her, but any woman should be aware enough to avoid situations like that.

The truck pulled into a spot in front of the coffee shop. It was more of a hangout for locals than anything else so she hoped that meant that it would be less crowded than the diner.

Sure enough it was, and they grabbed their coffees with ease. Jason insisted on paying. For a guy with tattoos, he was sure old fashioned. No use in arguing over the few bucks because she was sure he was going to bring up her trip home, yet again, if she did.

"Here, you hold the coffees and I will grab the box." He handed her the coffee not waiting for a response. "Where to?" She signaled him with her coffee cup.

"So how long are you in town?" She hoped she could have him for at least a few days.

"Not really sure." Was he evading the question or was he really unsure? She couldn't tell and wasn't sure it mattered.

"Are you staying at the inn?" He pretty much had to be, but it was polite to ask. "I stayed there when I first got here. It is nice enough."

"I hadn't really gotten that far either." She took a sip of her coffee, hoping he would continue to speak. He didn't.

"Left here." She answered his unspoken question as they stopped at the corner.

"I actually was only in town for about fifteen minutes before I met you."

She wished she could see his face, but with her short stature and his arms full of file boxes, she could barely see his forehead, which was giving nothing away. "Oh no, am I keeping you from getting your bearings?"

"No. You are helping me find them." His voice deepened. Was that sadness she heard? There was definitely more to this guy than a hot body and killer smile.

"Are you sure? I can help you find the inn and such."

"I passed it on my way in, but thanks."

"If you're sure." She wasn't going to push, or so she kept telling herself.

"I am." The stopped at the end of the road and pointed in the direction they needed to be heading. She was going a wee bit out of their way and her arms would be sorry by the time she got back to the cabin, but she really wanted to show him her favorite place. "I have found today much more enjoyable than I thought I would."

"I hope you are here for a bit." Her confession slipped from her lips. It was true. She wanted him to stay. She might have dated a lot in her past, but this connection she was already feeling to this man was somehow different.

"Me too." His admission filled her with emotions, the strongest being hope. She would probably spend hours tonight deciphering all that happened today, but for now she was going to sit back and enjoy the ride.

"Turn right," she instructed before taking another sip of her coffee. She had just about gotten to the point where her coffee would no longer spill as she walked. In hind sight she probably should have left the top sealed the way Jason had. His had not spilled one drop. "If we go on a bit, there are some nice rocks that are perfect for sitting."

"Is that Serial Killer Amber or Biker Chick Amber." Fair enough. She had that one coming.

"Neither, it is Tour Guide Amber," she pronounced proudly in her best announcer voice.

"You weren't kidding," Jason gasped as they entered the clearing she had fondly began to think of as hers. "It is as if Mother Nature left these rocks just for us." He wasn't wrong.

"I know." Amber grabbed the box from him and placed it on the ground. "I love it here. It is weird in a town like this because I assumed people would be here all the time." She handed him his coffee, which he preceded to open and take a sip.

"A town like this?" He took a long drink of his coffee, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Yeah, a town with people like … you know, me." She went over to the taller of the boulders and sat down, and he followed her lead. She liked this spot. She could look him in the eyes without having to look up.

"Wait, is this a shifter town? Huh? Guess that explains all the shifters in the diner."

Had he not known that? Crap. "Kind of?" She wasn't sure how to go about answering that. The town wouldn't be happy with her sharing their secret, but fuck the town. He wasn't a danger to anyone. She could feel it. He was a good man. Besides that, he already knew the shifter population density was high. "Isn't that why you are here? You knew who I was."

"I'm here because I have business to take care of, like I said. I knew what you were because I could sense your cat, but she is not one for coming out to play, is she?" Suck. He didn't miss a thing. "Usually I know right away what kind of shifter someone is, but with you I was half guessing."

"My jaguar is pretty hidden. I haven't seen her in years." Amber played with the rim of her coffee cup. She didn't like to talk about her jaguar. Not. At. All.

"Years?"

She needed to see his eyes to know they were showing sympathy. That was not the direction she had wanted this afternoon to go.

"Well, more like ever." She took a sip of her coffee. It was almost gone and her prop of avoidance would be gone. "Once in a while as a kid she would pop up for maybe a minute, but for the most part she stays deep inside."

"Huh, I thought I felt her earlier."

That had her head popping up and looking at his now quizzical expression. "What?" There was no way he had. Was there?

"I thought I felt her earlier, but just for a second or two." He put his coffee down on the boulder beside him.

"Really? I thought that was my imagination." She was talking more to herself then to him. She hadn't given credence to her feelings earlier. Maybe she had come out to play for a millisecond. That was a start, right?

"Doesn't that make you lonely?" He skootched a bit closer. "Having her there, but not."

"Yeah. It kind of really does." She leaned her head on his shoulder. She was too close to not be touching him. "How do you know about all of this? For that matter, how did you sense me?"

"I have always been able to sense what kind of shifter people are. Not sure why." He leaned his head to lay on hers. She felt so comfortable in his presence. "How do I know about this? That is kind of a long story. A story for another time."

"Why another time and not now?"

"Because now is for kissing."

That was a plan she could get behind. She turned to face him. "Kissing? Just kissing?" She was such a little tease; although, it wasn't really teasing if she meant to follow through on all the fabulous things that were now scrolling through her head.

"I never specified where such kisses would be?" And the day just got better.

"No. No you did not." She reached over and began to work the buttons on his jeans. "I know where I want to start."

"I had planned on starting." He leaned in and nipped her lip, immediately causing her entire body to shiver with need.

"Oh, no, mister. You are not playing fair." She playfully batted him away from her lips and continued to work the buttons. "You already shut me down once today, I'm not going to let that happen again."

"You really don't—"

"Seriously, are you going to do the whole *you don't have to, guys are the only one who actually like a good blowjob* thing?" She kept working on the buttons until she got every last one open. She had never been happier to find out someone free balled it than she was at that very moment.

"No?" he gasped out as she reached in and pulled out his cock. She took a moment simply to admire its beauty. It was long and hard, but that wasn't what impressed her. No, what impressed her was its girth. It was a thing of beauty, and the precum glistening from the tip was calling to her. She had to taste him. There was no way around it.

"Very good. Because I really didn't want to have to stop and explain how much I need to taste your cock. I want to get straight to the tasting."

"I'm not one to get between what you and—"

She cut him off with a lick. My goodness he was salty goodness mixed with a hint of sweet. She was going to enjoy this almost as much as she enjoyed the heady power of knowing her one lick made him incapable of finishing his sentence.

One lick was not enough. She gave a long lick from the base to the tip before swirling her tongue around and beginning to descend back to the root. "These jeans, need to go." Amber grabbed two of the belt loops and started to pull down. He was quick to help, but didn't say a word. When they were settled down his thighs, she went back to her feast. She took him into her mouth. She had been slightly worried he wouldn't fit with his girth, but it was like he was made just for her. She took him all the way down and was rewarded with a groan of pleasure. She looked up as she slowly pulled her mouth up, sucking in deeply as she did.

It was just as she thought, he was looking at her. His eyes half hooded. She knew that if she wanted to, she could make him come with only a few more moves, but did she want to? Part of her really did. The other part of her wanted to sit back and enjoy a long tease. Decisions. Decisions. She took him all the way down again, and this time added a swallow at the end. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him balling up his fist. The dear, sweet man was working so hard not to take over and fuck her mouth. Not that she would have minded if he did. She actually would have loved it, but that didn't make the sentiment less sweet. She was going to have to put the poor guy out of his misery. She made an inner bet with herself that she could be swallowing his cum in less than five more trips. She won the bet in two.

Eff You Mother Nature

Amber was pretty darn proud of herself. He was speechless. She managed to have him blown in record time and rendered him speechless. She wanted to high five herself, but was fairly sure that would be in poor form.

"Thank you," she said as she sat beside him. He pulled her close and began to kiss her with gusto. Most guys she had been with would have never even considered kissing her after a blowjob. Guys were so weird that way. All gung ho for you to have them in your mouth and for you to swallow their cum, but not at all wanting it near them. She didn't get it. Amber loved to taste herself on a man's lips after he had brought her to orgasm.

They were both panting as he broke the kiss. "No, thank you. That was … yeah." His words had still not fully formed and she loved it. She hoped that he was in town for a while. Maybe she could create an incentive plan. Get three piles put away and earn a Jason break. Not that she would tell him he was part of her plan.

"What has you so amused?" he asked as he pulled her top over her head. Jason must be a breast man. Good thing she had killer knockers. If only she had sported her nice bra today. And by nice bra, she meant the one without holes.

Amber had come to Woodland Creek with only her backpack full of belongings and hadn't added to them. If he stuck around, she would have to suck it up and spend some of her meager savings at Delilah's Delights. No way was she going to not at least have a good bra and panty set. Maybe they would have something on clearance.

"Well?" He was now removing her bra and any hope she had of remembering what he was talking about was gone.

"I have absolutely no idea what the question is anymore. Are you going to take care of these or not?" She glanced down at her now exposed breasts. Her nipples were standing loud and proud, waiting for attention. "I seemed to remember the promise of kisses."

"I guess now is as good a time as any to show you I don't break my promises." Before she could come up with a witty retort, he sucked her left nipple into his mouth and gave her a nip. That seemed to have a direct line to her clit and she had to stop herself from squirming. What was it with this man? One touch of his teeth and she was ready to beg him to do all kinds of dirty deeds.

Jason repeated the action with her other breast. She was done for. He was going to turn her into a blob of mush—she was oddly okay with that. "Is that better?" He was looking up at her as he repeated his action.

"Uh huh." She nodded. She wanted to touch him, but if he worked so hard not to take over when she was enjoying her time, she owed him the same respect.

"You are so beautiful. These," he held up her breasts to indicate what he was talking about, as

if she couldn't have guessed, "these are perfect. Completely and utterly perfect. I could sit here and feast on them all day, but from the way you are working so hard not to squirm, I am guessing there are other places you would like me to focus my attention."

She simply nodded, afraid that if she spoke she would break the spell.

"Your pussy needs my attention, doesn't it?"

"Yes." Her word was more a moan, and it sounded nothing like her. It was not going to take much for her to completely lose control and attack him.

"Stand up for me." It was not a question. It was a command, and goodness help her, she liked it. "Now turn around." Amber turned around slowly thinking he wanted a show, but she was half way around when he stopped her with his front pressed against her back. "Perfect." She could already feel his cock coming back to life. His hand reached around her middle and pushed her back in closer. Yep, that was a boner. Today was going to be fun.

His other hand wrapped around her and began working on her jeans. He had them unbuttoned and unzipped in record time. Instead of divesting her of her pants as she assumed was his original intent, he slid his hands down the front of them. "Normally, I would take my time and tease you to orgasm." His breath hit her neck as he whispered the words. "But I don't think that's what you want today." His hand stopped moving just as it approached her pussy. "I think today you want it fast, don't you?"

"Yes." Needy, she sounded needy. Heck she was needy, so how else was she going to sound.

"Well then, that is what I am going to give you." He began to move his hand again and quickly found her swollen nub. "I think I can have you coming in less than a minute." She squirmed trying to encourage him to move his hand. His finger was just sitting there on her clit. "Yes, I think that will be my goal for the day." Before she could reply and probably embarrass herself by admitting a similar bet had gone through her head when she was taking him in her mouth, he began to move. His fingers felt incredible. He circled her clit a few times before giving it a slight pinch and sinking his finger into her. That was all it took. She exploded around his finger.

His lips were at her ear saying words of encouragement as she rode out her orgasm. She couldn't remember a time that she had come that quickly and certainly not that forcefully. If he was not standing behind her, holding her up, she would probably be sporting a concussion from hitting her head on the boulder in front of her. Her body shook with pleasure and sounds seemed further and further away. Jason moved his hand slightly over her sensitive clit helping her ride out her orgasm to its fullest potential. The man was gifted.

Rain hit Amber's face. Suck. One crappy thing about the Midwest is the way storms roll in so quickly. It had been beautiful when they began and now she could see that the darkness had set in. One drop became two, which became many. Oh well, rain sex could be fun.

That was when Mother Nature decided to pull the ultimate cock block and lightning hit a tree within her eyesight. Rain fucking was going to need to be put on hold.

"Fuck."

"Fuck indeed," she agreed. "Rain sex is one thing."

"Yeah, lightning sex is a hard limit for me," he teased as he pulled his hand from her pants and began to zip them back up. "Which is closer?"

"Which what?" Amber gathered her bra and stuck it in her pocket. It was already soaking wet and would be a beast to put on.

"My truck or your cabin?" He was pulling his pants up as he said it, and Amber hoped he completely missed the panic in her eyes as he asked.

"Ummm." She grabbed her shirt and slowly pulled it on to buy a moment to think. Her cabin was a bit closer, but explaining why he couldn't see it would suck. Lightning hit again as she pulled the shirt past her eyes. Fuck it. The lightning was too close to play this game. "The cabin."

He had the box up, and like the thoughtful man he appeared to be, he had covered the box with the lid. It wasn't perfect because of all the items inside, but it was probably keeping most of the water out.

"Which way?"

"Follow me." She walked toward the place she called home, the whole time inwardly cussing Mother Nature for not only cock blocking her, but also for probably ruining the good thing she had begun with Jason. Living in an invisible house was probably going to freak him the heck out.

Home Sweet Home- Kinda

The walk was short, but in the dark rain it felt insanely long. The lightning didn't let up and Amber was certain she felt more trees crashing in the woods. Town was probably going to be a hot mess tomorrow. It had been a long time since they had this bad of a storm. Part of her wondered if a naughty wizard was involved. Thank goodness their electricity was generator and solar powered because lines were going to be down. The wind was picking up by the moment. Yeah, she decided, there was definitely something super natural about the storm.

As the rounded the bend to her clearing, she sucked in a breath. "It's right over here."

"Oh, it's cute."

"Huh?" She had to have misheard him.

"Your cabin. It's cute."

It was cute, but how could he see it. She looked closely. Yep, the blurry edges were there; the illusion was still up. It had taken her a solid month to learn how to see past it, and now it was second nature. Rosemary had likened it to when a child first discovers their reflection. Once they see it once, they always do.

"You can see it?" She knew he had, but she didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah? Oh, because of the illusion." He picked up his pace as yet more lightning struck nearby. She followed suit. That was one pissed off wizard. "Don't worry, the illusion is really strong. No one else would be able to see it. I just … It is like sensing kinds of shifters. It is just something I can do."

"Well, that makes things easier."

"How's that?"

"Well, I just spent the entire walk over here trying to figure out how to explain my invisible house to you as we dodged some dumbass wizard's storm." They were finally at the step, and she popped up quickly to get out of the rain.

"Witch." Jason was now standing beside her on the porch, both of them watching the storm. It seemed to be focused to the north. Goodness gracious, if this was the outskirts of the storm, she could only imagine being in the center of it. There was most definitely going to be a *meeting* over this one.

"What?" She had been so focused on the storm she had not really heard what he had said.

"It is a witch's storm. Not a wizard's."

She had to admit that made more sense. From the intensity of it, she guessed that cheating was involved. "Let me guess. You can sense it." Jason had so much power, yet seemed so, well, normal.

"I can." They both jumped a little as yet another lightning strike hit.

"Wait, you are not really human are you?" He couldn't be, but yet he felt so human that maybe he was.

"Never claimed to be." Wasn't that vague?

"Never told me you weren't either." She was not really wanting to play games, but she was feeling antsy because of the storm.

"True, but to be fair it would have been kind of awkward to say, 'Hi, I'm Jason. Nice to meet you. I'm a unicorn.' "

"A what?" She had to have heard him wrong. She had only met one unicorn in her life, and she was no longer in this world.

"A unicorn." She turned to look at him, momentarily ignoring the storm. He looked almost nervous.

"Jason, why are you here?"

He began to fidget a bit with the box in his hand, and she grabbed it from him, placing it by the door. She had a feeling they both needed to give their full attention to this part of the conversation.

"Because my great aunt passed away, and I was told I needed to take care of some business with her estate." He looked down as he said it. She was living in his house. Well didn't that blow. She went from having a smexy day to being homeless in one sentence.

"Suck an egg," she mumbled. She could probably stay with Patty at the inn for two weeks with the money she had saved up, but then what?

"What?"

"Well, let me show you around your estate." She pointed to the cabin door.

"Now, I am confused." Even as he said it, she saw the lightbulb click on.

"My roommate was not so much a roommate as much as she was a mentor. Rosemary took me in six months back, and I was apprenticing with her to become a healer." He just stared, so she continued talking, needing to fill the silence. "This cabin is yours. Those," she pointed to the file boxes, "those are actually part of my plan to get the house ready for whomever came to claim it. I had no idea you were coming so soon or I would have worked faster."

"This is my house?" He looked to the cabin and then back to her.

"It is." She was sad for herself, yet glad that Rosemary's family knew of her demise. In the back of her mind, she wondered if anyone had found the woman's family. They were oddly quiet about the whole thing. Woodland Creek, she had come to learn, was like that, though.

"And you live here?"

She swallowed hard and took a step back. She knew this day was coming, but that didn't make it any easier. "Yes, but I can be out as soon as you need me to be." She spit it out so fast she was sure it sounded like one word.

"Perfect."

"I'll just show you around and wait the storm out, if you don't mind."

He liked her enough to bring her to orgasm, so she was pretty sure he would allow her to avoid death by electrocution.

"No." She looked down. She didn't want him to see the hurt in her eyes, but he was not having it. His finger pushed her chin up to until he caught her eyes with his. "No. I mean perfect that you live here." He leaned forward and gave her a chaste kiss on the lips, not that her body got the "chaste" message. She was already wanting more. "I was not wanting to be away from you. It was the only reason I hadn't gotten a room at the inn when you offered."

"So I can stay?" She had to be sure she was understanding him. It didn't help that the stupid lightning kept startling her.

"You can stay. I mean, I want you to stay. I feel this need to be close to you." She knew exactly what he meant. She felt it too. "You have my unicorn so close to the surface and that has never

happened before. There is something about you, Amber. I don't know what it is exactly, but you are mine." This. Could. Not. Be. Happening. Did he just declare intent? Guys didn't do that on the day they met someone, especially when a blowjob was already freely given. At least not unless it was accidentally muttered during said blowjob. In her experience, lips around cocks tended to get men to freely promise the world.

"You sound like those silly romance novels with true mates and all." She would know. She devoured them when she was in college. It had been too long since she had read a book that wasn't related to healing. Not that she would complain. The skills she learned from Rosemary could take her far.

"True mates, no." He stated with too much seriousness. "That is the stuff of fairy tales." She wanted to counter that she loved fairy tales, but the intensity of his voice told her now was not the time for silliness. He was holding his emotions out to her. "But every sense I have tells me that you are why I am here."

"Not to collect your aunt's estate?" She stepped in close, hearing her shoes slosh as she did. That storm got them good.

"Not at all." He reached for her, wiping some moisture from her chin, the storm still waging around them. "I have all that I need."

She knew he meant money, but for a brief moment she allowed herself to pretend he meant her. That moment ended with another loud crash.

"She actually doesn't have much." Monetarily, that was accurate, but the knowledge in just one journal alone was priceless.

"People don't need much." His hand moved from her chin, pulling her dripping hair from her forehead.

"Isn't that the truth?" She had been happier here, with nothing to call her own than she ever had when money was no object as a child and college student or when money was tight but still flowing during her initial post college times. The sky lit up, yet again.

"Can we go inside now?" She nodded and bent down to pull her key from the backpack. "The porch is nice and all, but I would really like to get out of these clothes."

"Yeah, sorry." She carefully lifted the lid, hoping to prevent more water from falling inside. If she was lucky, the file folders were dry and she wouldn't have to replace them. "I kind of got overwhelmed by all the …" Victory, she found the key, and her backpack was mostly dry. "Yeah let's go inside."

She fiddled with the lock. She never understood why they locked the door in the first place. It is not like people could see the house.

"It is kind of messy in here. It was always clutter filled, but in my attempts to organize things, I made it worse." She apologized as she opened the door and turned on the light. The comforting smell of herbs filled her senses. That smell would always remind her of the woman who took her in when she needed it most.

"I kind of assumed it would be. Aunt Laura and my mother were the same way."

"Were?"

"Yeah, they are both gone."

Why had she asked? Somewhere along the line she had lost all of her social skills. "I'm sorry." She had lost everyone, but her losses were due to choices, both good and bad. Rosemary had been her first real loss.

"No need to apologize. It was a long time ago for both." Was he alone too? She wanted to know

all things about this man before her, but the mood was getting too dark.

"Want the two cent tour?" Amber opted to change the subject.

"I'm dripping all over the floor." She looked to the floor. He really was dripping. She then looked to her own feet.

"Suck. Me too. Let me go grab some towels."

She pushed off her shoes and ran to the bathroom to grab a couple of towels. She caught her reflection in the mirror. She was a mess. After a few attempts to straighten out her hair, she gave up. It wasn't like he hadn't already seen her this way. Thank goodness she hadn't worn any make-up; she would have looked like a raccoon.

Walking back, she was startled to see Jason standing there in all of his naked glory. She still couldn't see the intricacies of his tattoos, but his chest was covered—she would have to explore them later. She made the mistake of looking down and her eyes focused in on his cock. It was standing there at full mast. The messy house, the serious discussion topics, and angry storm didn't put a damper on his mood. Not at all.

"Ummm, your …" What … what could she possibly say? *Your amazing cock is standing there to greet me?*

"Naked?" Oh yeah, there was an easy way to say that. She stood in front of him and held out the towel. "Yeah, that." He grabbed the towel and began drying his hair.

"Why are you naked?"

"Because I was dripping wet and the floor deserves better." The tile floor of the entry way could easily handle the wet, but she wasn't going to argue. She got to ogle his sexiness. "Is there a dryer in here?" He pointed to the folded pile of clothes on the floor.

"Yes, of course, let me grab those." She bent to pick them up. "Here is another towel. You know, so you can dry off more than just your hair."

"Not trying to cover me up?"

Heck, no, she wasn't. He could spend the rest of their time together naked and she would be a happy, happy girl. "Have you seen you?" She reached in his pocket and pulled out the keys and wallet, placing them on the side table near the entry way. More accurately, she placed them onto the pile of papers on the side table near the entry way.

"You are pretty wet too, maybe you should strip down?" Gone was all the seriousness of their earlier conversation and back was the deep, sexy voice dripping with sex appeal and laced with lust.

"Maybe I will, but I will probably be cold if I do." She should be throwing his clothes in the dryer, but this was far more fun.

"Then I will probably have to warm you up." Yes. That is exactly what she needed. "It would be the gentlemanly thing to do and all."

"What about the tour?"

"Fuck the tour."

She dropped the pile of clothes and pulled her shirt over her head, dropping it to the ground with a thud. His eyeballs widened. "I'd rather fuck you." What was the saying? Go big or go home?

"My, my, you have a dirty little mouth." He took a step closer and began to dry her hair. His erection was bumping into her wet jeans, but he acted as if drying her hair was the only thing on his mind, even if his words told her the opposite.

"It would appear that you bring out the dirtier side of my personality." She idly ran her fingers over his abs. She would need to inspect them closely later. For now, she needed to look at his face and in his eyes. He told her so much with those eyes, and she didn't want to miss a thing.

"What can I say? It is a gift." he teased as he went about drying her face, then neck. He was taking his time as he did, and she was ready to move full steam ahead.

"No, this is a gift." She wrapped her hand around his cock. It was still a bit wet from the rain, and she gave it a slight squeeze afraid that running up and down it would cause too much friction. She needed it in working order for what she had in mind.

"Hear that?"

"No. What am I listening for?" All she could hear was her pounding heart. She was so worked up, and they had barely begun. She was still standing there in her sopping wet jeans.

"The rain. It stopped."

He was right, it had. She missed that. She had a feeling his naked body could distract her from all things.

"That means either she regained her temper, he adequately groveled over his cheating ways, or the sheriff stopped by and put a stop to it." She could care less which it was. She wanted to get back to naked time. Jason must have been thinking the same thing because his hand was now working on her button.

"With the way she was raging, my guess is on the sheriff." He spoke as if they were idly chatting over a cup of tea instead of standing there with her hand wrapped around his erection and his hand working to remove her jeans.

"Yeah, most likely. I bet town is a mess." The sound of her zipper sent a zing of anticipation through her.

"True, we should probably stay here while they clean it up." He dropped to his knees, gently working to remove her jeans. They were form fitting on a good day, and being soaking wet they clung to her.

"Probably."

He now had the jeans to her ankles, and he tapped her left leg. She lifted it as he removed her pants from her leg and then they repeated the process with her right leg. Amber was now completely naked, wiggly bits and all; his face was eye level with her belly button. Her squishy tummy was out there for him to see as he just kneeled there, looking at her body.

"What?" she asked, a bit uncomfortable with his scrutiny. She had learned to love her body, but the intensity of his gaze was borderline overwhelming.

"I was just trying to decide where I wanted to begin." He licked his lips as he said it.

"I say we begin in the bedroom." She pointed to her room. The faster they got there, the better.

"You're not an only in the bed and only with the lights off kind of gal, are you? I got the impression you were a bit more open than that."

She chuckled at him. Clearly she wasn't. First, she tried to get him off in a parking lot, and then she blew him in the clearing. Nope, lights off and bedroom sex was only part of what she enjoyed.

"I'm hardly that girl, but the tile floor is wet," she pointed to exhibit A, "and I have learned the hard way that that makes it slippery. I was hoping more for orgasms than for broken limbs." Lots and lots of orgasms if she had her say about it. "As for the rest of the house, this is basically all there is." She gestured to the space before them with her arm.

"What about over the couch sex?"

"Oh, there is rarely a time where over the couch sex is not top on my list, but look at the couch." Why, oh why had she not started her cleaning project with the couch instead of the closet? Over the couch sex was fan-freaking-tastic with a mediocre partner. She couldn't even fathom a guess as to how over the top amazing it would be with someone who could get her off in less than a minute.

"I see what you mean." For a moment she thought he was going to say screw it and throw the piles of papers onto the floor. She was glad when he decided not to. Those were her most organized piles, and while the immediate satisfaction would be great, she would never be able to bask in the afterglow. "Shower sex?"

"Are you saying you are a never in the bed kind of guy?" she taunted back. Shower sex might be fun, but not in the shower in this cabin.

"Oh, I am an in the bed kind of guy." Score. Sometimes lazy bed sex was the best. Especially in the morning. "I was just preplanning the rest of the night … and tomorrow." He gave her a wink. "The kitchen counter clutter already told me no counter sex, the kitchen table told me no table sex. I had missed the couch clutter. This place really is a lot like I remember her being; although, she always had a clean table."

"This one was always clean, too. That mess was my attempt at organizing, but that worked out well in the end so I regret nothing." She grabbed his hand hoping to lead him to the bedroom.

"How's that?"

"The mess made me decide to go buy office *things* and that led me to you." They were half way there when they passed the bathroom door and he pulled them to a stop.

"I think the table clutter is my favorite then. Now, back to the matter at hand." He pointed to the door in front of them. "Shower sex?"

"That would be limited to solitaire sex, I am afraid." Why, oh why couldn't they have a glorious shower to share? "It is a single stall shower. You are probably going to have to duck in order to rinse off your hair." It barely qualified as a shower. She was not tall and she was barely able to get her whole head under the running water.

"Well, it looks like I found the first thing I need to upgrade; the shower." He sounded serious, too.

"Yeah, ducking in the shower bites." He would discover soon enough that the water pressure also sucked.

"I was thinking we needed more room for shower sex." And they were back to sex talk. She had to get him into her bedroom and pronto.

"You are really thinking I should stick around?" She knew asking could put a halt to their evening of fun, but part of her was dying to know.

"Of course. One thing you will learn quickly about me is that I mean what I say." They were now in the doorway of her bedroom. It was tiny and her full sized bed barely fit, but it was clutter free.

"That is good to know." Amber crawled onto the bed, giving her butt a wiggle as she did. "I try, too."

"I appreciate that."

She wasn't sure if he appreciated her ass wiggle or her trying to say what she meant. She planned on doing both repeatedly, so asking for clarification was only going to delay her naughty fun time.

"Anything else I need to know?" She looked over her shoulder and saw his open mouth stare. Yeah, he liked her ass. She had initially thought he was a boob man, maybe she was wrong. Maybe he was an ass man.

"There is lots and lots you need to know." He climbed on the bed behind her. "Let's see if I can abbreviate them so we can go back to getting it on." She was down with that plan. She turned over to watch him as he spoke. "I always mean what I say." She ran fingertip down the side of his neck. "I try

to not question how I feel and jump in with both feet. I have seen how short life can be, and I plan to not lose a minute of it second guessing myself." Her finger now traveled down his chest. The tattoos she saw in the distance were now up close and personal. What she had originally thought was a bunch of random tattoos, was actually an elaborate tribal piece. It was stunning. "How about you? What do I need to know about you?"

"I think you know most of it." He was naked on her bed, and he wanted to have her form complete sentences. Was he mad? "I am a broken homeless jaguar shifter." It was a superficial response, but she honestly couldn't think much deeper than, *Don't lick the nice man yet.*

"Not homeless."

"Yeah, I kind of am. I appreciate you letting me stay here and all, but this place was never mine. I never even paid fair rent. I worked for my room." Were they really having this conversation now? She reached for his cock, hoping to change the direction of the conversation quickly. His hand stopped hers and she settled back on her chunk. It looked like this conversation was happening now, like it or not.

"At the natural remedies business."

"Yes at that." She looked at his cock and licked her lips. When she looked up to meet his eyes, he gave her a smirk. Bastard knew what she was doing.

"That is yours, you know." His cock? Goodness she hoped so.

"No, I am pretty sure it is yours," she licked her lips once again, "but I wouldn't mind playing with it for a while."

"Not that, minx." He waited until she made eye contact before beginning again. As much as he tried to stop her from turning this conversation into sex, she could tell he wanted her as badly as she wanted him. His cock was practically shouting it at her. "I was talking about the business. When I got the call to come settle the estate, I was told there was a parcel of land and a bank account that was mine. It seems that no one knew about the house; she never even mentioned it in her will."

"Why was that, do you think?" She knew that the towns' people seemed to not know where her house was, but none of them seemed worried about it so she never paid it too much mind. She knew where it was, and that had been good enough for her at the time.

"Rosemary lost her parents when she was very young. They were killed for their horns. It sort of really shaped who she became. My Aunt Laura told me that Rosemary spent her life trying to stay hidden." Rosemary never mentioned why she did what she did, and she had never pushed, just like Rosemary never pushed Amber for her history. They had an understanding that way, and now she wondered if they lost out by keeping their relationship superficial when it came to their pasts.

"That is awful. I thought people stopped believing in unicorns and the power of their horns generations ago." She had not met anyone that was not supernatural who seemed to honestly believe in them. Sure, she met many a woman who wished that shifters existed, especially dragon shifters for some reason. They were more wrapped up in the one and only true love and living forever stuff, and that wasn't reality even in the supernatural world.

"They did for the most part, but some still remain believers to this day."

"What is wrong with people?"

"I have no answer to that." Sadness now filled his eyes where lust had been. She was now her very own cock block. Brilliant. "Now, about the website and herbally stuff."

"What about it?"

"They told me she left it to her apprentice. It sounds to me like that is you."

Rosemary had left it to her? That was crazy. She had barely been there half a year. "That

doesn't make sense. She had family. She had you."

"She did, but she also had you. She also knew I was completely inept at healing." She found it difficult to believe he was inept at anything.

"So, I have a website and business." It was finally sinking in. It felt overwhelming, yet comforting at the same time. She would never be as strong a healer as Rosemary, but she had kept things going since the woman's death. With the knowledge mixed in all the clutter, she could strengthen her skills further. She had a career. A purpose.

"You do." She liked the sound of that. "Whoa, did your jaguar just pop up and say hello?"

"I don't think so." Why would he say that? What had he felt that she missed? She was going to have to pay closer attention to her inner self. If he felt her, chances are she was playing peekaboo and her excitement over the news overshadowed it. "I can stay here?"

"I would honestly prefer it."

"Because you want my body?" she teased; although, she knew he really did.

"There is no denying I do," he reached over and ran a finger over her nipple, "but that is not why."

"Then why?" She shamelessly leaned forward, not so subtly asking him to touch her again.

"Because it feels like you belong here." This time he ran his finger over her collar bone. She needed him and now.

"It kind of really does." Her voice came out all husky and deep. Even if her lust didn't show in her eyes, or the way her body kept leaning into him, her voice would have given it away.

"So, it is decided then?"

"What is decided? " His hands on her made things fall from her brain.

"You will stay here." Yes, she wanted to stay here, with him, naked in her bed for the foreseeable future.

"And pay rent, right?" She got up on her knees and inched closer to him.

"Yeah, sure." She watched his throat swallow. Please let this conversation be just about over. "If you want to."

"I really do." She reached for his cock, and this time he let her.

"Then yes, you must pay rent." She ran her hand up his cock after giving it a quick squeeze. "Lots and lots of rent."

"Whatever you want."

He brought his lips to her and gave her a sweet kiss. Amber wrapped her arms around his neck, not forgetting about his glorious cock so much as for fear he would pull away.

Sweet was fine and dandy, but her body need more. It needed raw. It needed passion. It needed hard. She slammed her lips to his, and he immediately took control back. He licked the seam of her lips, and she ignored it momentarily wondering what he would do if she denied him entrance. A quick bite of her bottom lip told her all she needed to know. This man was more than a one trick pony, and she was going to enjoy tonight, immensely.

She granted him entrance which he rewarded her with a tweak of her nipple. The moan that escaped her lips only fueled his passion, and his kisses traveled down her neck as he pushed her back against the bed. His weight was on her; she loved the feel of it. She needed more. She needed everything.

As if hearing her inner prayer, his mouth found her breast, and as he worshiped her left breast with his lips, his tongue, and his teeth, as his hand found her mound. This time he didn't go straight in for the kill. This time her circled around her clit before allowing his fingers to enter her.

He lifted his head from her breast and moved it to the other. “You are so wet for me. Do you know what that does to me?” He pumped his finger into her a couple of times before adding a second.

“What?”

“It makes me crave you even more.” He bit her nipple before kissing his way down her stomach. “It makes me crave a taste of you. You know we really didn’t get in a good lunch. I’m rather hungry.” He continued his decent. She was a huge one for giving oral pleasure, but never found a man who was worth anything giving it. She was pretty confident that was about to change. “Mind if I break for a small snack?” he asked as he stared at his fingers, still fucking her slowly. My word it felt good.

“It is only fair since I am the reason you are still hungry,” she bantered back. At that, he pulled his fingers from her and put them in his mouth one after another, sucking her juices from them. It was freaking hot.

“Delicious.” He barely got the word out before his mouth began its feast. He began with one long lick that ended with him sucking her clit into his mouth. She almost came with that one little move. She was in for a treat tonight if the preview was this amazing.

“More” she begged. She had never fancied herself a begger, but with him all of her past rules of engagement were just that, the past. They seemed to be writing the rules as they went along and begging just became an acceptable tool.

“Oh, you will be getting more, have no fear of that. You will be getting plenty more. I have it in my mind to have you coming at least three more times before we rest.” She was on board with that plan.

He repeated his long lick followed by the clit suck move, only this time he sank his finger back into her as her clit was pulled in his mouth. A small shutter ran through her body, and he took that as a sign. Repeat. The next time her small shutter grew, felling her orgasm building. By the fourth rendition of his dance, she was exploding around his fingers and screaming his name. That didn’t stop him from continuing on and he kept his fingers and mouth moving as she rode out her orgasm. She had never come so hard in her life, and she was not a starry eyed girl impressed with a first real orgasm after years of “I think I came.” This orgasm belong in the record books as best orgasm ever.

She looked up to see him once again licking his fingers, his chin glistening with her juices. Sexy. As. Fuck.

“That was …” She was too out of breath to finish her thoughts. What she needed was a quick nap.

“Oh no, beautiful. It is not nap time. I owe you two more orgasms before then.”

“This one counted as at least four.” She struggled to keep her eyes open. He had worn her out.

“What that was, was orgasm one.” His hands were back on her, this time sitting on her hips. “I owe you two more before naptime.”

“Sleepies now. Orgasms later,” she mumbled, now half a sleep. “Oh fuck.” She opened her eyes, to see him staring at her with a goofy grin on his face. Darn man was proud of wearing her out. He should be. That was some grade A work on his part. “You didn’t have your turn. Sorry.” She scrambled to sit. “I didn’t mean to … I mean, of course I wasn’t going to forget—”

“Whoa there, this is not about me.” He helped lean her back against the bed. “That is not completely true. It is about me in that I have this compulsion to make you come repeatedly, but it is not about you making sure I get my turn. You more than took care of my needs at the rocks.”

“I’m not going to argue that that was a super yummy time, but I think your glorious peen, that is angrily staring at me right now would disagree with your assessment.” She reached over and wiped the pre-cum off with her finger and brought it to her mouth. “He looks …” she popped her finger in

her mouth, slowly removing it in what she hoped was a sensual way, "and tastes like he needs to be taken care of again."

She could see the moment she won her case. She should have been a flipping lawyer. He covered her body with his and began kissing her as if he couldn't get enough. Heck, *she* probably couldn't, so it made sense he might feel the same. His erection was hard against her body. She couldn't wait for him to sink into her.

He ran his hand down her side and reached between them to find her clit. He was nothing if not determined. She was so hyper sensitive from her last orgasm that she was almost there with the first touch. Exploring his mouth, she held back her orgasm as long as she could. She wanted this to last; her need for a nap was gone.

He moved his kisses from her lips to her neck. He slowly moved down her neck as his hand kept working her bud. She wasn't going to last long at this rate. As he worked his way back up her neck and reached the sensitive area just below her ear, she gave up and let the sensations take her away. This orgasm didn't crash into her like the previous two he had given her did. This time it slowly built up until she was sure should couldn't come any more. It was glorious.

"Best. Orgasm. Ever."

"I bet you say that about all your orgasms," he teased, moving his mouth to her breasts once again. The man was on a mission.

"Honestly, today I have." He looked up at her, and the goofy grin returned. "Now get inside me. If I am only getting three orgasms today, I want at least one of them to be with you inside of me."

"For the record, I never said three today. I said three more *before* resting." She playfully smacked his shoulder. "That said, I am down with having the next one occurring with me inside of you. Where do you keep your condoms?"

"Condoms? Don't you have one?" He shook his head. "Not in your wallet?" He shook his head again. "Don't all guys keep condoms in their wallets?"

He rolled off of her. "Fuck, of course you don't have condoms. You live in an invisible house. Not like you could bring boyfriends home."

"So, that is a no on the wallet." It was fact, no use hiding it in the guise of a question.

"That would be more of an 'I can't believe I am such an idiot and never put a fucking condom in my wallet.' " He pulled her closer and she snuggled into his side.

"So you're not a player, I take it." She absentmindedly ran her fingers over his tattoo.

"Not at all. I could never get into that. I am a one woman man."

That made her cringe. What would he think of her if he knew how many men she had slept with in her past?

"Want me to take care of that?" She pointed to his still very hard penis.

"Actually, not so much." His face fell. Had she ruined the moment by not telling him to come on in unwrapped? She hadn't gotten the impression he even wanted to, but maybe she was wrong.

"Excuse me?" The hurt in her voice was undisguisable. Oh well.

"You told me the next time you came you wanted it to be with me inside of you, and since that can't happen, I say we let Mr. Horny wait it out."

"Mr. Horny?" She knew some guys named their penis, but she had never expected something as silly as that to come from his mouth.

"Unicorn here." She gave him a look before sitting up. "Hey, where are you going?"

"I need to put your clothes in the washer, so that I can then dry them and we can go into town. You owe me an orgasm mister, and if it means getting all domestic and shit to collect, so be it." He

laughed and laughed as she walked out of the room buck ass naked, shaking her assets. Thank goodness they had a ten minute wash cycle on the machine. It was not good enough for a heavy load, but should be fine for one set of clothes.

"I'm back," she announced as she walked back into the room. She was feeling very playful and oddly not overly sleepy. "Miss me?" She climbed into bed beside him. He was now under the covers, and it was oh so warm and snuggly that it had her second guessing her need for a nap.

"Very much." His words came across as more honest than playful.

"How come you didn't push me for bare back sex?" The question couldn't leave her mind, so she might as well throw it out there.

"Because that is a decision to be made when we have choices and not because it is bare back or nothing." She snuggled in closer. He was so right. It was one thing to throw the condom on the ground and say, "Skip it." It was another to say, "Crap, we have no condom. Screw it, go in anyway."

"Most guys would have." He was not most guys, though, and she hoped her statement didn't hurt his feelings.

"And what do you say to most guys?" The lightness in his voice felt forced.

"Fuck no."

"Good answer." He ran his hand down her arm.

"It was the honest answer. I won't lie to you and say I'm virginal. I'm twenty-seven and didn't spend my life making the best relational choices." Amber already felt better putting it out there, so she decided to go for broke. "I made mistakes, far too many to get into, but I never made the mistake of letting anyone in unwrapped. My life is worth more than that."

"But you wanted to with me?" His fingers continued to caress her arm, and she could almost feel the tension leave him.

"Yeah, I did." Amber grasped his hand as it arrived at her wrist and laced her fingers with his. "Or at least I wanted you to want to."

"Why is that?"

"Because you are different." He pulled her in even closer. "I can't explain really explain it. You feel like *more*, and you trusting me enough to want that … well, it felt like I was that to you too." She looked up to meet his eyes. "I'm not sure if I'm even making any sense. It's stupid, I know."

He brought her hand to his lips. "Not stupid. Honest. Brave. Not stupid." He accentuated each word with a kiss.

"More like embarrassing."

He kissed her hand again. "Endearing." Silence filled the room, and she wasn't sure if she should break the silence. It was kind of nice simply being, yet there really was more to say. He made the decision for her. "Truth be told, if we had had what we needed and you had wanted to leave it on the nightstand, I probably would have jumped all over that."

"I heard guys like it better." She had had enough guys begging her to forgo the condom to know that it must feel freaking fabulous.

"I wouldn't know."

Amber loved the sound of that. She. Loved. It. "You never?"

Jason made sure he had eye contact with her before answering. "Never."

"But you might have with me?" She was more to him, too. Sure he had said the words, but knowing he was willing to follow those words up with actions solidified them in her mind.

"I plan to with you."

She could not wait. "Not now though?"

He shook his head slightly, his eyes dancing with amusement. Jason seemed to love the way he made her feel just as much as she loved the way she made him feel. This was all so new to her. This was not dating or a casual fling. This was … more.

"No, not now, beautiful." The loud buzz of the washer timer filled the room. "Now it sounds like I need to switch the wash."

"Cut that out." She sat up, still holding his hand. "I will switch it."

"You are not my maid, you know." He sat up beside her, pulling her onto his lap. His poor erection was still bobbing between them. It had to be uncomfortable.

"You best remember that." She gave him a peck on the cheek. "Next time it is all you, but right now, me doing it is more out of laziness than anything else."

"You probably should explain that." He began kissing her neck, and for a moment she had actually forgotten the question. He must have sensed her distraction because he gave her earlobe a quick bite. She knew he was a unicorn, but in many ways he acted more like a feline shifter: all bitey and such.

"The dryer is pretty craptastic …" he began distracting her with his lips again, and Amber had to focus extra hard on forming her thoughts, "and you … don't know the trick to making … ummm … it work." He pulled his lips from her neck and gave her the *I am a grown ass man and can use a dryer* look. "Seriously, after five minutes of me listening to you fiddle around with the darn dryer, I would have to go in there and do it anyway." He smirked and shook his head slightly before giving up and going back to work driving her crazy. She really needed those clothes dry so they could go and get some stupid condoms. "Me doing it actually saves me a lot of trouble."

"But you will show me how to use it." He wasn't asking, he was telling her. He really wanted to know. Jason was not going to be a *Where's my sandwich?* kind of lover. Heck, he might be the one making the sandwiches. Or better yet, maybe they would not even leave the bedroom for days at a time.

"Heck yeah, I will." She stood from the bed, wanting more than anything to jump right back into his lap. She loved how she could sit there on his lap, not at all self-conscious about her weight. The last time she sat on a lovers lap was … well, never. It was a first, and that made her smile. "No way am I washing all of your dirty socks all of the time." As she walked to the dryer, she turned her head to catch him unashamedly ogling her ass. "I have things to do, you know." His eye remained planted on her ass, and she gave it a little shake. "Did you not see the piles of paper everywhere?" His chuckle filled her ears as she made record time switching the wash. She had snuggling to do.

Waiting All Kinds of Sucks and Not in the Fun Way

"What about you?" Snuggling in bed, half asleep was a beautiful place to be. It was also dangerous. She had been thinking about his plans in her head, and then boom, the question fell from her lips.

"What about me?" He sounded as if he, too, were halfway to slumber.

"What are your plans? You know for after the estate is settled."

"Is that what you were thinking about? I thought we were having brainless snuggle time." He was behind her with his arm wrapped around her middle, and he pulled her in a bit closer. Not *all* of him was in slumber.

"We were, but then my brainless snuggle turned into replaying the rest of the day over again in my mind. And we started this conversation and then …" She rolled over so that she could look at him as they spoke. "Boom ... hormones, so we never finished." She put her hand on his cheek. Some stubble had started to grow in, and her stomach clenched as she imagined the roughness on her inner thighs as he brought her to orgasm. Yeah, they would need to try that.

"And …"

"Sorry, I got distracted." He moved his cheek against her hand before dropping his sight between them. Oh yeah, he knew exactly what she had been thinking. "And, I guess what I want to know is, where are you staying?"

"Here." He brought his eyes back to hers as his hand moved down her back to cup her ass. "I hope."

"What about Oregon? What about your job?" They had never discussed his home, but those Oregon plates wouldn't leave her mind. Oregon was not at all close to Indiana. Not. At. All.

"Eh, Oregon was just a stopping ground. I was only there for a few months."

"And the job?" She had no idea what he did, but the truck was nice enough. He seemed to have no interest in his aunt's money, so he must have a semi-decent one.

"I can do that anywhere."

"What are you, a tech millionaire?" she teased.

"Pretty much, yeah." At first she thought he was playing along, but then she saw the seriousness in his eyes. Holy. Crap. He wasn't kidding.

"For serious?" She knew he was, but she was at a loss for what else to say.

"Yeah, for serious."

"But you drove here?"

"I am not a fan of flying. My unicorn likes to be close to the ground." That made so much sense. Unicorns, unlike jaguars, were not climbers.

"So this house is basically a shack to you?" She looked around the tiny bedroom. If he was

even a thousandaire, this *was* shack-like.

"A bit small, yes, but a shack, not at all."

"So you are going to give up a life of luxury to live in the middle of the woods in a tiny invisible cabin with someone you just met?" It sounded too good to be true.

"I lived in the middle of the woods in Oregon."

She didn't miss his use of the past tense. He was serious. "In a cabin?"

"Define cabin." Oh yeah, it was no cabin. It probably belonged in one of those television shows where people are trying to find their perfect home with a budget of only four million dollars and nothing decent was in their budget.

"Made of logs?" Amber queried. She always loved log cabins, and as much as she called this place a cabin, it was more of a home in the woods in her mind. A true cabin needed logs.

He nodded, but didn't meet her eyes.

"How many logs?" Amber met his eyes as she asked. He probably cleared a whole forest the way he was being so unforthcoming with information. It made sense though. A young hot guy was probably used to hiding his wealth if for no other reason than to avoid the gold diggers.

"About ten times as many as this place would have used." He looked almost embarrassed by that.

"A log mansion?" She rolled him onto his front and began to explore his back, massaging him as she did. The conversation was getting too serious and that made her need to touch him.

"Yeah, something like that." She straddled him to get a better angle. "That feels amazing."

He was not wrong. Feeling his muscles under her hands did feel amazing. "And you want to live here?"

"For now." It was like a bucket of cold water was dumped on her head. She kept her hands moving, happy that he couldn't see how much his words crushed her.

"I understand." She tried to keep her voice firm and confident as she spoke. She failed.

"I don't think you actually do." He somehow managed to roll them over in one movement and her back was now on the bed. His weight settled on her and his eyes were boring a hole through hers.

"Explain." She more mouthed the word than spoke it. She was so quiet that she didn't even hear it.

"I want to live here for now as we figure out what is going on with us." He rubbed his thumb below her eyes. Stinks, she actually shed a tear. Her emotions were a hot mess of hormonal induced insanity. "If we find I am right and this is more than a lust induced delirium, then we will decide *together* where we want to live: be it here or in Oregon or on a deserted island somewhere."

"And if we are just in a lust induced stupor?" That was her biggest fear in all of this. She wanted it to be real so badly. Why couldn't true fated mates be more than just lore?

"Then I will leave you be and head on my way."

"Leave me be?" Her jaguar popped up for a second. She didn't seem to like that, not one bit.

"That was her." She nodded. "Did she come out for me?"

"I … I don't know. She doesn't ever come out. She has come out more since I met you than she has in the past twenty years."

"What did she seem to be telling you? That she didn't want me to let you be?" She nodded, still trying to process it all. "My unicorn did the same thing."

"He did?" Could their animals truly be on the same page?

"Yes."

"Okay, I'm trying to wrap my head around all this. First, are you saying that my staying here is

not contingent upon us sleeping together?" She never felt like it was conditional, but in the back of her mind she had wondered. Hormones and lust had a way of people promising more than they meant to. It was just how it was, and she wouldn't have judged him for it.

"Of course. Did you think it was?"

Crap, she hurt his feelings. That was not at all what she wanted to do. "Not at all." She reached up and caressed his cheek, once again enjoying the feel of his stubble. "Just trying to lay this all out in my mind. It is kind of a lot."

"It is." He rolled off of her and took her with him until they were both lying on their sides, face to face. It was somehow more intimate than only moments ago.

"Second, are you saying that your unicorn wants me?" She wished she understood what a healthy connection with a shifter's animal felt like. Hearing people talk about it, wasn't the same.

"Heck yeah, he does." Jason leaned forward and kissed her cheek before whispering in her ear, "He wants you as badly as I do. Possibly more."

"Does he want women often?" Amber felt Jason stiffen up beside her. Leave it to her to say the wrong thing. "Sorry," she mumbled. "My jaguar is MIA, so I don't completely understand all of this." That seemed to relax him a bit.

"Never be sorry for making sure you understand where I am coming from." Jason rested his hand on her hip. "To answer your question, he has never wanted a woman before. He never seemed to care either way. He just was there. With you, though, he is always close to the surface." She wanted that with her jaguar. Why did she have to be so broken?

"As far as staying here, the cabin is the location of the business, so really it is yours to do with what you will. You deserve it." Oh crap, she had forgotten how this conversation started. No wonder he was slightly on edge. "Rosemary was sad when no one in our family seemed to have a knack for healing. I am guessing that is why she moved here. She must have been excited when you picked it up."

"I think you are right about her being happy. She mentioned numerous time how quickly I picked things up and how easy it was making her life."

The buzz of the dryer was glorious.

"Your clothes are ready. Did you want to take a quick shower while I get them?"

"Or you could take a quick shower and I could get them and then take my shower." They both sat up. As much as she would have loved to spend the day snuggling with him, they needed to get to the store so they could buy condoms they weren't going to use. For some reason that amused her to no end.

"Fine, be stubborn. You will be sorry you were." No use fighting, she would pop in and take the world's fastest shower and hope there was enough water left for him.

She left him on the bed and cleaned up as fast as she could. He had already seen her a sopping wet mess, so she skipped the make-up and opted for a loose pony tail. They had places to be, after all.

"Shower is all yours," she announced, standing there in her towel.

His jaw dropped. Oh yeah, he liked what he saw.

"Give me three minutes." She could have sworn she heard him mumbling that the store was too far away for his liking. She couldn't agree more.

Errands

"Our shoes are squishy." Amber could hear each of their steps as they walked through the muddy woods. She only had the one pair, and he had left his extra duffle bag in his truck.

"You need more shoes." He wasn't wrong.

"These are really good shoes when dry and it's not as if a witch-induced storm is a normal occurrence, not even in Woodland Creek." She didn't want to get into money. He had a butt ton and any comment she made would only highlight that discrepancy.

"But you should at least have a pair of muck boots for when you have to travel through the mud." She wasn't about to tell him that she had a pair that were currently held together with duct tape.

"Normally, I would just stay home when it is like this." Normally, she would just stay home period.

"Not today, though." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and she nestled into his side, looking down the entire time to avoid tripping on one of the plethora of tree limbs scattered in the clearing they were now entering.

"Oh no, not today." She kicked a larger limb from their path. "Today, I have an errand that needs a runnin'." She would have been all for skipping the errand and staying home, but she understood his rationale and would never push him, just as she was sure he would never push her.

"Errands." He pulled her to the left, so they could avoid one of the larger limbs. "We also need to pick up new shoes."

"Oh, I assumed you had a second pair in your truck."

"I do." He pulled her to the right. "Darn branches," he mumbled, his foot sunk into the mud in his maneuver to avoid yet another branch. "I meant we need to get shoes for you".

"Yeah, that is not on my list for today." It wasn't actually on her list for the near future.

"Are you seriously going to let this turn into a silly argument?"

"I didn't realize that was the direction we were heading." She pulled her foot from the mud … again. Amber couldn't wait to get to the pavement. "In all seriousness, do you want to drive to the next town to get shoes? Unless, of course, you are thinking I should get *come fuck me heels* from Delilah's Delights." She heard him gasp. Oh, he liked the sound of that. She never understood guys liking heels in the bedroom, but heck she was game. Maybe she would pick up a cheap pair online after her next round of shipments went out. "I'm thinking those are even less practical than the squishy sneakers I am currently sporting, though."

"Delilah's Delight?" His voice slightly cracked. Oh yeah, his mind was still in the bedroom.

"Down boy." She pushed into his side. "You missed my point."

"Ohhh, I think I got your point, my mind was just wandering … elsewhere." She knew where, because hers was visiting there also.

"Well, bring your mind back. We are just about to town, and I kind of would like to keep that," she stopped and cupped his erection, which had to be painful pressing against his fly, —maybe that was why he used button fly jeans instead of zippers, "to myself. I'm not one for sharing."

"That works for me because I'm not one to share either." Great, now they were both on fire for each other and they'd be in town before they knew it.

"So, aside from Krieger's and getting your truck, do you need anything else while we are here?

"Krieger's?"

"The grocery store."

"No, I think that works, unless you wanted to grab a bite to eat while we are here."

She was hungry, but that could wait. "I say we just grab a rotisserie chicken and call it good." They would have to eat it on the porch, but sometimes sacrifices needed to be made. She would make the kitchen counter and the table a priority tomorrow. Today, she was making naked time tops on her list.

"Impatient are we?" he teased.

"You have no idea," she growled. Wait was that? He pulled her into a hug. It was. Her jaguar growled.

"Me too." He spoke into her ear, the heat of his breath bringing all of her lust back in full force. "Her too." Heck yeah, he felt it too. She still didn't stay long, but she made a noise and that was a first.

"Your truck …" Amber panted. The darn man had her panting with just the heat of his breath—oh, tonight was going to be fun. "… is closest, so let's go snag it."

They raced to his truck. When they got to Drake's, however, all they saw was a crowd of people, a fire truck, and some construction looking vehicles. They rounded the corner to where he left the truck and the cause for the commotion became clear. The truck was sitting exactly where they left it, but unlike when they left, it was now under a telephone pole.

"Fucking witch," she mumbled. His truck was a mess.

"Hey, this your truck?" a guy in a hardhat and orange vest called out.

"It is," Jason answered. He seemed far less pissed off than she was.

"We are working on getting the pole off of it. It looks like the side of the diner took more of the brunt of the fall, so it is probably drivable; although, your camping shell is pretty much toast." The man was talking a mile a minute and gesturing to the pole, diner roof, and truck as he did.

"What kind of time are you looking at?" Jason still sounded beyond calm.

"Not really sure. We are trying to figure out how to remove it without increasing damage to either Drake's or your truck. The sheriff is in a *meeting* or I would ask his advice on the best way to make a start. I just really don't want to make things worse." The poor man seemed so nervous. It was nice that he cared, but honestly, the damage was going to be severe either way.

"This was only a telephone pole, right? No electricity?" Jason inquired, keeping his eye on the back of his truck.

"Yeah, what a mess that would have been."

"So I can try to grab my bag from the back of the truck?" He said it as a question, but with such authority that she knew he was going to try regardless and was just asking out of politeness.

"I would prefer you didn't." It wasn't a no.

"The tailgate is already down." Down, fallen to the ground, same thing.

"Fine, just be careful." The man knew he was going to lose and was a hot mess of nerves before they had even asked. He must know more about the *meeting* than he led on. Maybe it wasn't a

lovers' quarrel. Not that it was her business.

"Will do." He was able to grab the bag with ease and was back at her side in moments. She really preferred him there. "See, no harm, no fowl. Here is my card, call me when it's available to move." The man took the card and his eyes bugged wide when he read it. She would have to see what was so intriguing about it later.

"Yes sir, will do. I hope it is soon." Amber was good with either really soon or much later. She had already been cock blocked multiple times, getting a broken truck out of a parking lot instead of getting it on was something she hoped to avoid.

"Ready?" Jason sounded more than ready. He must have been having similar thoughts. They were worse than horny college kids.

"Ready." She grabbed his hand and led the way. She felt bad he had to carry his oversized duffle, but even if she thought she were strong enough to carry it, there was no way he would allow it. He came across as pretty old fashioned like that.

The grocery store was farther than she remembered and was an extra-long way, thanks to her soaking wet feet. It must have been worse for Jason; although, you would never guess it by the spring in his step.

"Hey, want to sit down and swap out your shoes?" She should have thought of that a few blocks ago. Poor guy was suffering for nothing.

"No." He kept walking and didn't skip a beat.

"But your feet are wet." Obviously he knew that, but his answer made no sense to her.

"And so are yours."

"Your point?"

"I'm not going to be walking around all warm and snug as you suffer." He stopped at the corner and looked both ways before he began to cross. "What kind of a man would that make me?"

"A normal one with dry feet."

"No. It would make me a jackass." As much as she wanted to argue, he was kind of right. If he had done it without her offering first, it would have been a complete dick move.

"Not changing after I suggested it, makes you a stubborn one."

"I'm really okay with that."

She gave up. Stubborn man. "Turn left here. There it is." She pointed and was shocked at how oddly empty the parking lot was.

"It is larger than I thought," he mused.

"It is, but don't let the size fool you. It is fairly limited in its selections." Coming from a larger city, that was what she had initially missed. Many of her favorite foods were simply not available. They did have an amazing butcher though. Catering to a town with a high percentage of carnivorous shifters had its advantages.

"We don't really need a wide variety." He used a fake sexy voice as he spoke. Even in soaking wet shoes, with a damaged truck, and carrying a duffle bag that could probably fit a body, the man kept his humor.

"I didn't meant that." She gave him a light shoulder bump as to not throw him off balance while carrying his belongings. "I meant in general."

"I knew what you meant." He shoulder bumped her back. "So chicken, condoms, home?"

"Maybe a side dish or two also, but yeah that is basically all we need." If they were lucky, they could be back at the cabin in less than an hour and before it got dark. Not that she minded walking in the dark, but walking through the mess the storm left in the dark wouldn't be fun.

"Perfect."

The store was more crowded than she would have guessed given the empty parking lot. They were lucky that there was still chicken left, given the time. "Ohh, lemon pepper or traditional?"

"Traditional?"

"Sounds good." She liked both, but the lemon pepper did sometimes approach the salty side. She gave a quick scan of the prepared foods. It was pretty bare. "Salad and cornbread work for you?"

"Sounds perfect."

They walked down the main isle and he pulled her to a stop. "Look over there. Garden clogs are on sale in the season section." He failed to mention they were big ugly garden clogs.

"So?" She knew where he was going with this, but she wanted him to be wrong. They were twenty bucks of ugly that probably were uncomfortable to boot.

"They are shoes. You need shoes." She gave him her best stink eye. "They are designed for mud." She might as well give up. He seemed to be determined, and they probably would come in handy during mud season.

"If I agree to a pair, will you be happy?"

He smiled and walked closer to the display. "Immensely."

She snagged a pair and threw them in the cart.

The condoms were, of course, on the most embarrassing aisle ever. On one side they had the baby diapers—you know, to let you know why you needed the little raincoats. Below them were feminine hygiene products, including creams for unwanted itching. To the right, they had all the medicines and supplements you would ever need to make you regular. Yeah, merchandising was not really wanting people to buy these.

The placement didn't seem to bother Jason at all, though. He grabbed the biggest box on the shelf and held it out to her. "Here."

"Seriously, did you just snag the mega variety pack?"

"Yeah, so?" He seemed confused, as if it were completely logical to grab a bulk pack of things you have zero intention of using.

"They are $36."

He leaned over dropping them in the cart and whispering in her ear as his lips passed. "And for her pleasure."

He was not playing fair, nor was he being at all logical. Not only was the "her pleasure" a crock of shit to get guys to spend more, but the multi pack had one hundred condoms. "Her pleasure would be to grab the three pack for a couple of bucks and to throw them in the bathroom drawer and forget about them." There. She told him.

"And if *she* changes *her* mind and we run out?" Considerate Jason was coming in for the kill.

"I won't." It was true; she had zero plans to even open the stupid box that was finding a new home in her cabin."

"But if you do?"

"Fine." She waved him off in defeat. "Waste the money, but you are carrying that thing home."

"Asshat."

Amber smiled at his teasing return of her words, but shit, he was right. She was being an asshat to the nth degree.

"Your asshat," she conceded and stood on her tip toes to kiss his cheek, her shoe making a sucking sound as she did.

"Yeah, mine." He turned his head to capture her lips. "Home," he mumbled against her lips.

“Now.” She led him to the register as quickly as she could.

Sometimes History Should Not be Repeated

"I feel the energy rising again." Jason pulled her around a broken branch as he spoke. "This witch is either out of control or trying really hard to be noticed."

"Do you think it will be another storm?" Amber had assumed that the town *meeting* had been able to identify the witch and put a stop to her behaviors. She hopped over another branch. Their path home was a disaster, and she was happy that there was still daylight to be had.

"No. This one feels different." He seemed to be more thinking aloud than talking to her, and he actually tripped a bit on a branch.

"Different how?" Everything felt the same to her. Darn her jaguar.

"Different … young?" He seemed unsure at first and then firmly added "Young. Very."

"I don't understand." She kept walking, the urge to get home stronger than before, but not out of the lust she had been feeling only moments earlier or even fear for the power brewing. No. She felt like the house was calling her.

"It feels like a child." She squeezed his hand as she continued on her ever quickening pace. How could a child have caused all of this? "An insanely strong child, but a child. The weird part is the energy, it seems to have nowhere to go. Like there isn't a plan for it. Maybe it is accidental?"

"Do you think it is the same witch as before?" How could it be, but yet as she said it, she knew it was. "Should we call the Sheriff?" Jason pulled her to a stop and didn't begin to speak until she was facing him.

"I think that would not end well." The seriousness of his facial expression caused a shiver to run through Amber's body.

"What aren't you telling me?"

Jason closed his eyes and took a small step forward, swallowing as he did so. This was not good. "If it is a young witch out of control, what do you think they will do to her?" His eyes remained closed for a moment before he gave his head a shake and opened them to meet hers. Fear was brewing in his eyes.

"Teach her how to control her powers." The moment the words left her lips she could feel the wrongness of them. Of course they wouldn't just give her a time out or lessons. She was dangerous.

"That would be nice, but more than likely they would bind her powers." Binding a witches powers was the equivalent of taking away a shifter's animal. It would make her a shell of who she was.

"That is horrible." Amber's life had been less than sunshine and roses due to her stubborn and hidey Jaguar, but her Jaguar had always been there. If her Jaguar had been taken from her, she would have surely crumbled.

"It is better than back in the day when they used to kill them."

Amber stepped into his arms, the bag from the store and the bag of wet shoes thudding on the ground as Jason dropped them to comfort her.

"They killed children?" She knew the witch burnings of history were real, but she never thought about the fact that children might be among them.

"Did Rosemary ever tell you why she was living in a hidden cabin?"

She had asked numerous times, but was always given an evasive answer. "Not so much. She hinted that it was because of her powers." Amber pulled her head back to look up at Jason, saw sorrow racing through his eyes, and quickly snuggled back into his chest, bracing herself for what she knew would be a story without a *happily ever after*.

"Her sister was killed in front of her when she was a child." His voice cracked with emotion.

"What? How?" she gasped out before thinking.

"She was killed because she scared people. She healed someone who should have died, and they called her a necromancer. She was burned like a witch in days of old." Necromancers weren't actually real, but people seemed to fear them more than the actual scary things in this world.

"How could they do that to a child and in front of her sister, too?" Poor Rosemary. Her old friend carried so much and yet gave her all to help Amber from the moment they met.

"The whole family was there. They killed her parents next." Tears were flowing from Amber's eyes. That is something no one should ever have to go through, much less a child. "Rosemary only got away because her illusion was strong enough to hide in the trees. She was the youngest, so they assumed she was unskilled and didn't focus on her whereabouts or the security of her ropes the way they did with the others."

"She got away."

He pushed away slightly and wiped her tears with his thumbs. "She did." He forced a smile and continued on. "That was when she took the name Rosemary. A sprig of Rosemary gave her the inspiration to hide and pulled her from her fear."

"Rosemary?" Amber pulled out her inner file cabinet to find rosemary. It had a lot of uses medicinally and in culinary arts, but nothing stuck out at her as reducing fear or helping with illusion.

"It is used both as to bring love and as a memorial in folk lore. She wanted to honor their love by being alive to share their memory with others." His voice was lighter now. He seemed to be focusing on better memories.

A shiver ran through Amber and from the looks of it, Jason as well. "What was that?"

"That was our little witch." He bent down to pick up the bags with his right hand and grabbed her hand with his left.

"What should we do?" They were walking at a quick clip, thanks to Jason's lead.

"Go home, grab some supplies, and then go find her." They were practically running now.

"Supplies?" She would need to make sure they had them all before getting too far from town.

"A flashlight, a backpack with some water and food." Phew. She had all of those things at the cabin, and since they were closer to the cabin than town, that was a relief. "And one of my grandmother's old journals. Do you think you can find it if I describe it?"

Crap on a cracker. She knew it was too easy. "I hope so. I am not very far in my quest for organization."

"It is covered in a quilt-like book cover. It almost looks like a blanket was made for the book." Phew. It was the one thing she knew the location of with certainty. It was under her pillow waiting for the time she would need it.

"I do. She told me it was for me, and I would know when I needed it."

"Now. You need it now." Their almost running became a sprint, making it back to the cabin in record time.

Amber grabbed the journal and brought it out to Jason as he threw random things in the backpack she directed him to. There was not much food in the house, but there was enough.

"Here." She held out the book to Jason who shook his head and continued to fill up a water bottle.

"It's not for me. You open it." He capped the water bottle and began to fill a second.

"To where?"

"I don't know, but you will." Code. The man was talking in code.

"What?" She needed more answers, but he kept continuing to pack. The backpack was going to be heavy at this rate.

"The book is spelled by the witch who raised my grandmother. It will open to where you need *and* will open to a photo album to all others." Wasn't that a handy trick? She hoped he was right.

"Why me? Shouldn't it be you since you are a relative?" The book began to vibrate so slightly she might have missed it if she hadn't been so focused on it.

"Because you are who Rosemary chose."

"How do you know?" He was right. She could feel it.

"You live here. No one else has ever even been here." Rosemary had mentioned that, but she had thought it was more of a *no one ever visits* kind of thing. It had been so much more than that. She opened the book three quarters of the way.

"It opened up to a healing powder from the looks of it, but it has no name." She flipped through the book but all of the other pages were pictures of trees. This was the page. Reading through the directions she was much relieved to have all of the ingredients on hand. "I don't have it, but I have the things to make it."

"Do it." Jason's voice was firm and demanding. He must have sensed his harshness and immediately lightened his tone. "Will it be ready right away or does it need to sit and cure or something?"

"You don't know anything about healing do you?" It came out as flip, which was not her intent, and she mumbled, "Sorry."

"Not a thing," he admitted as he zipped the bag. His part of preparing, finished.

"It will be ready once I blend it and say the words." He gave her a nod and put the backpack on his shoulder. "I can mix this up in a few minutes." Relief showed on his face.

"Like a spell?" She gave him a quizzical look. "The words?" She hadn't really thought about that.

"No. Yes. I don't know. I'm not a witch so I don't have that kind of power, but Rosemary was raised by one, apparently. So maybe?" Could they work without the words? She would need to look into that further. Since she was not a witch it was possible. "Not experimenting without the words today." Amber answered her unspoken pondering.

"Agreed." He must have let his mind wander there also. She quickly mixed everything and placed in it a small canning jar. As much of a cluttery mess the house was, the healing supplies were very well organized in the pantry. Thank goodness.

"Done." She screwed the jar on the lid as he handed her an empty back pack.

"Let's bring the book, too."

She was planning to leave it there, but he was right. They might need it again. She quickly grabbed a bunch of dried rosemary. She doubted they would need it, but it pulled at her so Amber

went with it. “Where are we going?”

“To catch ourselves a witch.” Because that answered everything.

Little Witch, Little Witch, Let Me Come In

They had been walking for almost an hour in mostly silence. Every once in a while Jason would tell her they were turning left or right and a few times warned her about a branch, but mostly they were just silent. Amber just kept repeating the words she said over the powder over and over again, more out of comfort than out of actually doing anything. It was in a language she didn't understand, but was pretty good at reading after her time spent with Rosemary. Amber only understood two words and those were *Death* and *Hide*. Neither of them sounded good to her.

"Over here." Jason's voice was low. They must be getting close. "See it?"

Amber looked. She saw trees, broken branches, rocks, and that was pretty much it. "See what?" She lowered her voice to match his.

"Close your eyes." She did as he said without question. "Remember the first time you saw Rosemary's?" She nodded, not opening her eyes. "How did she help you see it?"

"She told me to look past the tree she was pointing to. She said to make myself see through it, like if I was trying to see through a mirror."

"Yes, perfect." He gave her shoulder a squeeze. "When you open your eyes, do the same where I am pointing."

Amber nodded and opened her eyes slowly. Jason was pointing to a rock, and she did as he said.

"Nothing." She was frustrated and took in a deep breath. It had taken her an hour to see the cabin she now called home, and Amber knew she didn't have that kind of time. She needed to focus.

"You can do it," Jason whispered in her ear.

She tried once again, and this time a tent began to come into focus. They were at a campsite hidden from all who weren't looking properly. The tent looked old and small and the pull of the zipper let them know they were not unnoticed.

"Hello," Amber gave a tentative call as she took another step. "We are not here to hurt you. We are friends."

"Strangers," a young voice called back. "Mama said never talk to strangers."

"That's a good rule, but sometimes you need to ask for help from a stranger." Amber offered her hand. A young girl popped her head out of the tent in response. "My name is Amber and this is Jason."

"What do you mean about needing help?" The girl crawled out of the tent, keeping the flap close to her. She was protecting whatever was inside.

"I am a Jaguar."

"You don't feel it." The girl stood and leaned in slightly. The girl couldn't have been more than four or five. Her hair was plaited, and from the looks of it, it had been quite a few days ago.

"I know," Jason acknowledged for Amber.

The girl looked her up and down again before giving her attention to Jason. “She is broken.”

“I came here to get help from a stranger.” Amber interjected. She hoped the last bit hoped the confession would put the young girl at ease.

“Is he the stranger?”

“No, it was my great aunt who helped.” Jason’s voice was low and soothing. Amber would have to ask him about that later because there was definitely a level of magic added to his tone.

“She didn’t help.” Amber looked at the girl and then back to the tent. A small wave of magic, strong enough for Amber to feel, but not strong enough to scare her. A warning. This little one was going to be a force to be reckoned with when she grew up. Amber quickly took her eyes from the tent.

“She did, just not in the way I thought I wanted her to.” It was true. Amber went there looking to find her Jaguar, but instead found a gift of healing and Jason. “But she helped me a lot.”

“The storm.” Jason took a step forward and then dropped to one knee so he was now looking the young girl eye to eye. “It was yours?” Amber had assumed it was the young girls, but she couldn’t taste magic the way Jason could.

“Not mine.” The girl’s hands were now on her hips. The girl had spunk.

“Then whose?” Amber joined Jason kneeling in front of the girl as she spoke.

“Mama’s.” Jason had said the new magic felt younger. Of course it was the girl’s mother.

“Where is Mama?” Jason looked to the tent briefly and then back to the girl, who in turn gave a slight nod before catching herself and meeting his eyes again.

“Will you help her?” For the first time since they found her, the girl sounded like a scared little girl. Amber’s heart hurt for her.

“We will try.” Amber wanted to lie to the girl and say all would be well, but if a witch as powerful as the one who created the storm was allowing her young daughter out here without her, then things were bad. Really bad. “Can we go see her?”

“In the tent.” The little girl pointed. Amber got up and was stopped by a hand on her knee. Jason didn’t want her up yet.

“Is she angry? Is that why there was the storm?” Protective Jason was out in full force.

“No. She wasn’t angry. Mama says to never use magic in anger.” That was a relief. “Mama said she needed people to know she was here and that the magic would bring them.”

“Did she say why?” There were so many ways to draw attention that would not lead to a *town meeting* and possible removal of powers.

“No. She said time was almost over, made the storm, and then went to sleep.” That didn’t sound good.

“The illusion, is that hers, too?” It seemed counterproductive to draw in all of the attention a storm would bring and then hide.

“No. I did that. We always block the tent when we are sleeping.”

“You?” She seemed far too young to be that strong, but Jason had mentioned her magic, so maybe it was. “How old are you?”

“I’m five. Mama says I am the most powerful witch in my generation.” She puffed out her little chest as she said it. It would have been adorable if the situation had been less intense. “I can’t wake her up. I tried. She just lays there, not moving.”

“We felt it. The storm and you.” Amber’s voice cracked. Please don’t let her mom be dead. “I brought things to help.” Amber held out the backpack.

“How did you know what to bring?” The girl took a step back, as if aiming to either run or to bring forth her magic. Stinks.

"The person who helped me when I came here," Amber stood slowly as to not scare the girl any further, "she was a Unicorn Healer, and she left it for me." The girl's posture relaxed a bit.

"Is that what you are? Is that why you feel so off? Mama says that Unicorn Healers are to be respected." The girl dipped her head in Jason's direction.

"Yes, princess, they are. I am a unicorn, but I am not a healer; my great aunt was. Amber is the healer."

"I'm not a princess. My name is Kit, and I'm a powerful witch." Her indignation was cute, and now that they had her name. Amber felt like they were getting somewhere.

"Yes. Yes, you are very powerful," Jason agreed whole heartedly. "Can we see your mom now?"

"Help her, okay?" Kit closed the distance and grabbed Jason by the hand. He had won her trust. Amber just prayed she didn't lose it.

The scene in the tent was worse than Amber had feared. On a small blow up mattress lay a young witch, no more than twenty-five and the spitting image of Kit. Unlike Kit, however, this witch didn't seem to be breathing. Amber bent in front of the woman and placed her fingers under the witch's nose. It was warm, so she was breathing, but barely.

As Amber grabbed the powder from the backpack, she thought about how to administer it. Normally, the directions for any of the powders they made would be to mix it in a tea and sip it slowly, but that was out of the question for multiple reasons. Amber took a few pinch-fulls of the powder and put them in her cupped hand. Unscrewing a water bottle with her teeth, she added a few drops at a time to the mixture. It was less than sanitary to make a paste in her hand, but options were limited and it looked like nothing in the tent would be any better.

Once the powder was almost the consistency of toothpaste, she swiped some onto her finger. "Kit, I am going to take this medicine and put it in your mom's mouth."

"Will she wake up then?" Amber's heart hurt. She wanted to say, "Of course she will and all will be sunshine and roses," but in all honesty she had not a clue what was wrong with the woman or what the medicine she was giving her actually did. "I hope so."

"Fix Mama." The little girl was now hugging Jason and crying.

Amber placed the paste under the woman's tongue and leaned back. Amber knew things wouldn't happen immediately, but she wanted to see a small sign before continuing. The last thing she wanted to do was fill the poor woman's mouth with the past and leave her choking. A small twitch of the woman's eye was all the sign Amber needed. She added a bit more of the medicine onto the inside of each of the witch's cheeks and then took the bottle of water and pushed the rest of it in the small opening. She closed the lid and shook it. It was slightly cloudy, but not quite the consistency Amber was hoping for so she added some of the loose powder that was still in the jar, taking care to leave half the jar full in case this plan didn't work.

Gasp.

Amber heard a gasp, but in her head. She gave a quick look around the room. Kit was sitting on Jason's knee staring at her mother. Jason was watching Amber intently, but neither of them looked as if they had said a thing. She looked back to the woman. Her eyes were now moving a mile a minute as if in REM sleep.

Sit. Up. Please.

It was the woman; Amber knew it. How, she had no idea, but for now it would have to do.

"Help me sit her up, Jason."

Without question he did and they sat the woman up. There was nothing solid for her to lean

against in the tent, so they stayed by her side as supports. They sat like that for seconds that rolled into minutes. The entire time Kit sat on the other end of the bed rubbing her mother's foot and chanting under her breath.

Amber focused on hearing the words the girl was saying. It was now her time to gasp. They were the same words that were said over the powder. Amber joined in and both of them began speaking louder. Jason joined in after a few repetitions, as if he had just figured out the words. Amber had no idea if any of them other than Kit had the ability to use the words as more than just noise, but she gave it her all. Kit was far too young to lose her mother.

Cough.

They kept chanting, only now all eyes were on the still closed eyed witch who had coughed. That was an amazing sign. From being so close to death that Amber thought for a moment she was dead to coughing was a great improvement. Now if they could get her to awaken, speak, and move on her own.

Cough. Cough. Cough.

This time was different. This time the woman's eyes opened. They were not the bright green of her daughters; they were dark and the whites of her eyes were tinged yellow. They were not out of the woods yet.

"More," was all the woman got out before her eyes closed again. More what? More chanting? More Medicine?

"Mama." Kit had stopped chanting. But Amber and Jason continued on. "Quick, she wants the bottle."

"Huh?" Amber was pulled from her chanting as Jason continued on.

"Mama asked me for the bottle. Help her drink." Kit was adamant, and Amber reached for the bottle, gave it a shake, and took the top off as Jason moved behind the witch so she had something to lean on.

Bringing the bottle to the woman's lips, she poured a tiny bit in, not wanting to choke her. When she felt the woman swallow, she repeated the action until the bottle was half empty.

"More?" she asked Kit, who just stared at her for a moment before giving a slight shake of her head. "Should we lie her down again?" This time the girl nodded.

"Mama says we just need to wait." Kit laid down beside her mother and snuggled in close. The poor girl had obviously gone through a lot.

"Did Mama say how long to wait or if we should do anything while waiting?" Jason seemed at a loss as to what to do, not that Amber felt any more confident.

"She said not long now. She told me to close my eyes, and when I woke up, all would be right." Kit closed her eyes again, taking the nap mandate seriously. Amber smiled at the cuteness of it and knowing everything would soon be okay.

"This was not the evening I had planned," Jason teased with Amber snuggled into is side as they waited for Kit to emerged from the tent.

"I would imagine not." Thinking back over the day, it was hard to believe all that had happened.

"What do you think is going to happen?" That was the million dollar question.

Amber entwined her fingers with his. "I don't know, but those two have some power in them." Amber knew she should be afraid of that, but she wasn't. They were here for a reason. All four of them.

"They really do," Jason agreed. "Kit seems to believe her mom will be fine now."

"Then she will." Amber looked to the tent again. Straining her ears, she thought she heard the beginning of movement, which filled her with much relief.

"Agreed. Why do you think they really came here?"

"It looks like we are about to find out." Amber signaled toward the tent as the witch emerged without her daughter. The woman's eyes were no longer near black. That was a really good sign.

"I'm Mariah." The woman began as she walked in their direction. Her movements didn't appear weak. If Amber were to guess, she was close to as good as new. "Kit says that you are who I have to thank." The woman sat in front of them before they could rise.

"Honestly, I think Rosemary is who you have to thank." It was true. Rosemary not only taught her the art of making healing powders and tinctures, but also left her the book to direct her.

"The healer." Mariah nodded in acknowledgement. "She is why we came here, but I couldn't find her."

"That is because she passed," Amber confirmed what the woman had clearly been thinking.

"And she gave you her gifts?" Mariah looked Amber up and down. "I see. It makes sense now. Is that why your jaguar is in hiding?"

"What?" Amber spit out with zero composure. "Can you sense her?"

"I can, but barely." Either Mariah had a stronger sense of shifters than Jason did, or her jaguar really was coming closer to the surface and earlier had not been a fluke. "It is as if she fears that she will harm you more than help you. Does that make any sense to you?"

None. None at all. Amber just stared back at the woman.

"It seems odd to me, too. Maybe after I am feeling a bit better I can ask her about it."

"You can talk to inner shifters?" Amber had heard of lovers whose animals were able to talk to each other, but it was rare. She had been led to believe it was because of their connection to each other. She had never heard of someone being able to talk to random inner animals.

"I am a shifter." Mariah stated as if it made sense, even though her body language shouted out

worry as she picked at her skirt.

"I sense witch." Jason wrapped his arm around Amber's shoulder in a protective movement. "I don't sense your animal."

"Ahhhh … the unicorn is unable to sense another of his kind. Interesting." Mariah spoke low and as if more to work it out with herself than to antagonize.

"You don't feel unicorn," Jason's voice was firm with an accusatory tone. "You feel witch."

"Part witch," Mariah conceded. "Are you of Rosemary's line?"

"I am." Jason's tone softened a bit, and Amber had a feeling he was putting some pieces together. Pieces of what? She had no idea. "Then we will have lots to discuss in the future, but for now, I fear we need to get Kit and leave this place. "Can you take me to your home?"

"No, but I can take you to Amber's." It was weird hearing Jason refer to the cabin as hers.

"That will do; although, some unicorn magic would be good about now." Fear tinged her voice. "I feel them coming. It looks like my storm worked a bit too well and some angry townspeople are on their way."

"They probably are." Amber swallowed roughly. "The storm you created caused a lot of damage."

"I meant to keep it right where we were so someone would come looking and find Kit, but it was too weak. I never meant it to be so broad."

"They did look for her … you. I heard them mention a *town meeting* which is, come to find out, a euphemism for taking care of supernatural business." Amber looked to the tent and saw two eyes staring back. She waved the young girl to her. "Your Kit here hid the tent when she realized you couldn't. She has a very powerful illusion."

Kit ran to her mother and was engulfed in a hug. "Mama, you're awake. Are you all better now? Is the sickies all gone?"

"Oh, sweet Kit, I am awake, and we need to go. We are going to stay with Amber and Jason for a bit." She put Kit down. "Go grab Mr. Teddy and run right back. We will get everything else tomorrow."

The little girl did as she asked and they were at the cabin in very little time, eating the now cold rotisserie chicken on the front porch in under an hour. Mariah shared their story as they ate. The story of how the young mom was struck by an illness that she couldn't take to a traditional doctor and how she came here to find Rosemary.

It turned out that she was the great granddaughter of the witch who took Rosemary in as a child, and while they never met, Mariah had been told stories about Rosemary her entire life. While they were not related by birth, she called Jason her cousin, and he seemed to like that just fine. Kit did as well and quickly took to calling him Uncle Jason. It wasn't long before she fell asleep on her mother's lap, and they could talk more freely.

"What should we do now?" Mariah whispered over her sleeping daughter's form.

"Now, we get you two to bed. I hope it is all right if you share a bed. The house is pretty much an episode of an *organize your home* television show waiting to happen." Amber gathered up the plates as she spoke.

"Sharing is fine. What about tomorrow though? The town?" There in lied the rub. Amber didn't know the town well enough to know what would happen next. She had only recently discovered their brand of justice, and while she chose to believe that no harm would come to the girl and her mother, she couldn't be sure.

"I say that tonight you and Kit sleep." Jason took the reins, which was great since Amber had no

idea what to say. “Amber and I will go and get your camping supplies. They know Amber, so they won’t think anything of it.” That was a stretch. They kind of knew her, only because of Rosemary’s demise, but they could easily think they were camping since Rosemary had kept her house so hidden.

“There’s not much there.” Mariah’s voice still barely more than a whisper. “Just the tent, the air mattress and a backpack of clothes. We forced to travel light after the car broke down and we had to hitch rides.” The story just got sadder and sadder. Amber swore to herself that she would help the woman get her car and her life back.

“Before we get you settled in for the night, can you tell me what was wrong with you? I know you didn’t want to say in front of your daughter, so it must have been really bad.”

Mariah looked down at her daughter and gave her sleeping face a small smile. When she looked back up at Amber and Jason, she swallowed deeply before beginning to speak. “It was—” Her voice cracked and Mariah’s face showed every bit of her youth.

“You don’t need to share if you don’t want to,” Jason reassured the woman as he took the plates from Amber and placed them beside her. She had forgotten she was holding them.

“No, you saved my life, so you should know.” Mariah looked down, as if embarrassed by what was coming next. Amber wanted to reach out and hug the woman and would have if she wasn’t holding her sleeping daughter. “My ex, Kit’s father, was a very powerful witch. He was also an abusive prick and unbeknownst to me he was married. When his wife found out, she killed him and put a curse on me.”

“A death curse?” Jason asked as if he already knew.

“Yes. She said I deserved to die slowly for tempting her husband. I was eighteen when I met him. I was waiting on tables, and he was nice and handsome and treated me well at first. I didn’t lure him. He lured me.” Yeah the bastard deserved his death, preying on a woman barely an adult all the time he was married.

“But you are okay now? I mean with the curse and all?” Amber had a brief moment of panic. What if she only bought the woman some time and she was going to die soon anyway.

“I am.” The reassuring smile that shown on Mariah face reduced Amber’s anxiety tremendously.

“How?” Jason seemed less reassured.

Mariah looked to Amber as she answered his question. “The spell you said over the medicine, did you not know what it was?” Amber shook her head no. “It was to raise the dead.”

“I … I … I can raise the dead. That’s impossible.” Amber had been told numerous times by Rosemary that they could help many people with many ailments, but something would be beyond them. Death surely hit that bill.

“Not really.” Mariah closed her eyes as if to gather her thoughts. “More like you can raise the nearly dead and only from magical deaths.” Amber thought back to the tent and her initial thought that the poor woman was dead. She really had been nearly dead. “You are a very powerful Healer.”

“I didn’t feel powerful,” Amber confessed. “I actually didn’t know what I was doing.” The truth of that scared her. If she could heal as powerfully as it seemed, she had a lot to learn. How many people would suffer because of her lack of training?

“If you are this strong already, you are going to be an amazing healer.” Awe filled the woman’s voice.

“You really are.” Jason’s voice was close to her ear. His words were meant for her alone, and somehow that made them seem … more.

“Are you a healer?” Amber didn’t want to keep prying, but there was so much she wanted to

know.

"No, my strength is more in weather, which is mostly banned and hardly useful."

"It led us to you," Jason interjected.

"That it did. I'm so glad. I never thought to tell Kit to leave the illusion down. My own lack of foresight almost caused her harm."

"No, it meant that we found you and not someone who might cause you harm." Amber tried to reduce the woman's second guessing of herself. She really had done right by her daughter. It could have been so much worse. That thought formed a pit in Amber's stomach. She already loved the little girl, and they had known each other for only a few hours. The thought of any harm coming to her kicked Amber's protective instincts on high alert and seemed to bring her jaguar closer to the surface. Not much, but enough to let Amber know she was there. Interesting.

"Mama." Kit was talking in her sleep. "Mama." Adorable.

"I think we should head to bed. Show me the way?" Amber nodded and got up from her perch on the porch.

Jason snagged the dishes before she could. He was so domestic that for a split second she felt like flinging herself toward him and begging him to take her. Mariah shhing Kit back to sleep brought things back into focus. She led them to Rosemary's old room. Amber told Mariah where the towels, extra blankets, and bathroom were before wishing them a good sleep. Goodness knew they deserved one.

Jason was at the front door waiting for her. He had a backpack over his shoulder and looked like the day was new instead of what had turned into an extremely long day. Amber smiled. That morning she woke up completely alone. In one short day's time she met Jason, Mariah, and Kit. Even her jaguar seemed to agree with her on that. Amber allowed herself to hope this was the beginning of a new life. Hope never hurt anyone, right?

Camping Can be Fun. Who Knew?

"I think this is technically part of Rosemary's estate," Jason pondered aloud as they reached the campsite.

"I actually never asked her where her property ran. I assumed she was squatting, and that was part of the reason she stayed so hidden. It wasn't until she was gone that I knew she actually owned the land." Amber gave his hand a squeeze before letting it go. "You know I have never been camping. I have less than no idea how to take a tent down without breaking it."

"Really?" Humor filled his voice. Her lack of camping seemed to tickle his funny bone. Come to think of it, it was odd for shifters to sleep inside all of the time.

"Unless you count discount hotels, really." She playfully smacked his arm. "Let me get everything out of the tent, and then you can school me on all things camping, Mr. Horny." Opps. She hadn't meant to open that can of worms and briefly hoped he missed it.

Jason's eyes darkened. Yep. Can of worms open. It was back on and they had things to do. Amber tried to regret it, but heck, just saying his peen's nick name had her needing him just as badly as his eyes indicated he needed her. Jason stalked over to her. Yep, stalk was the word. She was his prey and Amber was perfectly happy with that. The way he moved, you would have guessed his animal was a predator. A fierce predator.

"Sorry. I didn't mean—" His mouth was on hers before she could begin to finish the sentence. Not that she wanted to. In fact, if his mouth never left hers, Amber would be quite a happy gal. His mouth explored hers, as if on a mission, and just when she thought it couldn't get any better, he allowed his kisses to migrate to the magical spot just below her ear. The spot that seemed to have a direct line to her pussy. Not that her pussy was unaffected by the rest of the kissing. Nope, her panties were already drenched.

"I. Need. You. Now." His words were heady and raw with kisses and nibbles between each one of them.

"Yes," slipped from her lips, barely a whisper between her labored breathing. This man had her breathless. "Now."

"Need to get you ready first." He reached for the bottom of her shirt, and she grabbed his hands.

"Ready now. Let's do fast and hard now. We can do all things later. I need too badly." Great her sentences were not actually complete.

"Did I say I was taking requests?" His hands were on the button of her pants, so her guess was that yes, he was taking requests.

"No," she teased back. "Are you?" Her hands were now working his jeans, and she was rewarded with a groan.

"Today is your …" She slipped her hand down the front of his jeans, and he momentarily lost

his train of thought. Amber relished the feeling of knowing she could make him feel this way. "Today, I am taking requests." He had her hand out of his pants, her pants down, and Amber facing a tree before she could come up with a witty retort. "Hand on the tree." She immediately obeyed. There was something about a man taking charge in the bedroom, or in this case the woods, that just did it for her, even if it was technically *her request*. "Lower. That's my jaguar." At that her jaguar did pop up and this time she actually stayed.

"Whoa."

"Whoa indeed, now lean forward. She wants this." Amber wanted to savor the moment with her shifter, but Jason realized what she didn't … the jaguar came out to play. "Oh my, your ass is a sight to behold. Oh, the day I pinken it will be a day of much pleasure."

"Yes," she gasped. She had never been one for spanking, but heck, with Jason wielding the smacks, she knew it would bring her to whole new levels of hot.

"Greedy jaguar. You already gave me your request. No changing now." He leaned over her back. She missed him removing his pants, and his rock hard cock was now pressed against her ass as he reached around front. "Oh my, you are ready for me. I really want to make you come with my hands first, but a promise is a promise." He circled her clit as he spoke, and Amber squirmed trying to get him to hit the target she had in mind. "Behave," he teased.

"Need." Great she was now a beggy chick like in her novels. Eh, fuck it. She was going in for all it was worth. "Need now."

"Yes. Yes, you do." His agreement was returned with her grinding her ass into his cock. His groan leaving no room for doubt that he needed too. When he pulled away, Amber whimpered. Oh goodness she was a goner. "Hold on, sweet one. I wouldn't leave you like this. I am just grabbing a condom."

"Leave it." She was happy he remembered one because being cock blocked by a lack of condom would have been pretty much made of evil, but he could leave it where it was. Thank you very much.

He was back within seconds. "Are you sure? It is here. Will only take a second."

She adamantly shook her head no. "Leave it." Amber was proud that she sounded less needy and more demanding, especially since it worked.

The condom in his hand didn't reach the ground before he slammed into her the first time. Oh yeah. He was taking hard and fast at face value. She almost came the moment he entered her. This man was made for her, to be sure. In and out and in and out he slammed with his hands on her hips. She was fairly sure he would leave marks where his hands were, and she would wear them proudly.

Jaguars bit their mates to mark them, but unicorns were not predators so she wasn't sure he would officially mark her at all. Her jaguar perked up even more at the thought of a mating mark. Goodness gracious, was this why she had been hiding all along? Was she waiting for a mate?

"Stay with me." Jason broke her from her thoughts. "I feel her too, but stay with me. That's it." He reached around front and found her clit. He circled it twice before giving it a quick pinch. That was all it took and she was exploding. "You are squeezing me so tightly. It feels like you were made for …" His own explosion ended his thought.

"That …" Amber was panting. Yes, panting. Again.

"It was, love, it was." She knew he couldn't possibly love her, but the term of endearment filled her with contentment nonetheless. "I hate to break the moment, but I feel people coming." She scrambled to get herself dressed, yet he stood there as if he hadn't mentioned an audience at all.

"Get dressed," she hissed, hearing the people he had mentioned for the first time. They were

close. He just smiled at her as a group of townspeople entered the clearing. Fuckity fuck.

"Oh, sorry." He reached down and yanked his pants up as if they startled him out of the blue. What game was he playing?

"Oh," came from the one woman in the small group. "We were … never mind." She at least had the decency to blush. Jason was a genius. Getting caught gave them all the alibi they would need.

"*Meeting*?" Amber asked as if speaking in code, shielding her eyes from their flashlights. Not that any of them really needed them. She didn't want to out Jason, and she wasn't sure if they could tell what he was. They all nodded. "We haven't seen anything, but as you can see, we were kinda busy." She looked down, feigning embarrassment.

"And you are?" One of the townspeople she had yet to meet asked.

"I'm Amber and this is Rosemary's heir. I was showing him the … property." Jason choked on a laugh. He was having great fun watching her fake embarrassment.

"I … ah … see," the woman replied, never meeting either of their eyes.

"I'm Jason." He held out his hand, but no one stepped forward to shake it. They all looked beyond embarrassed. Suits them right for having a modern day witch hunt. "I was planning to build a home here. My cousin and I were thinking of moving my business." That seemed to peak their attention and filled Amber with warmth. He was not only staying, he was making sure Mariah and Kit were safe and taken care of.

"Well, isn't that wonderful." They were now no longer all looking at the ground, and a man came to the forefront. "What kind of business?" She could see the dollar signs in the man's eyes. He must be on the town board. She just shook her head with mirth.

"I am a coder." Oh yeah, he was vagueing them out. Smart man.

"Coder?" the woman asked. It annoyed Amber that none of them introduced themselves, but she was probably a bit to blame since she lived such a secluded life.

"Computer stuff." They nodded at that response.

"I see. Well, be sure to stop by town hall to get all of your permits before you begin."

"Absolutely, sir." Jason began to fidget. "So, ummm, we were kind of …"

"Oh yeah, sorry, we will be on our way." With that they left, and she watched the woods making sure they were gone.

"Faker," Amber teased as she turned to face Jason.

"Absolutely." She walked into his waiting arms. "Does that plan work for you?"

"Plan?" He gave her butt a quick smack. "Oh, that plan. Yeah, I think that plan is fabulous."

"Minx."

She pulled back to look him in the eye, reaching for his cheek as she did so. "Yes, to answer your question. I like the plan very much. Do you think Mariah will agree to stay?"

"I hope so. I think she needs to be here."

"I agree."

"Your jaguar came out." He flicked her nose playfully.

"She did." She retreated the second the townsfolk appeared. It didn't feel like fear that drove her away, but more of a *fun time is over best go home* kind of thing.

"I think she likes me." He bent down and kissed her deeply. Her engines were already revving.

"She is not the only one." Still out of breath from his kiss.

"Was it her or you who was driving you to mate?" Oh crap. She hadn't expected this conversation. Which was it? She had to be sure before answering.

"You felt that?"

"I did." He gave her a quick kiss. "I liked it." She could have sworn he puffed out his chest as he said it. He was as hooked on her as she was on him. Perfect.

"You pulled me from it, though."

"I never want you to make a decision about me in the moment. I want everything we do to be regret free." Considerate Jason.

"I have a feeling it will be. Do … ummm … do—" Amber knew she shouldn't be embarrassed to discuss mating acts with someone she had gotten naked with numerous times, but this felt more intimate somehow and was brand new territory.

"Do unicorns mate?" Jason put her out of her embarrassed misery. He was a keeper, and it sounded like he wanted to be kept.

"Yeah, that." Her face was burning up. Even in the dark, she was sure he could see her bright red cheeks.

"We do, but I won't bite you when I do." Interesting. Not unexpected, but interesting.

"When *you do,* what will you do?" Her voice came out much more sultry than she expected, and by the way his eyes flashed, he liked it.

"That will be for you to find out." He gave her but another quick smack. Good thing he was an ass man because she had plenty of ass for him to enjoy. "Now let's get this packed up and go home."

Little Jaguar, Little Jaguar, Where are You?

Amber snuggled into Jason, keeping her eyes closed trying to recapture her sleep only to be startled awake when she realized she was snuggling against a pillow, no Jason to be found. Reaching with her hand, she felt the coldness in his spot. He had been gone a while. Peering at her clock, she saw it was near ten. She never slept past seven, but with the long day she had, it was no surprise. Goodness, she had grand plans for when they went to bed, but they fell asleep before she could enact her plan of naked fun.

Bang.

Someone was cooking, or attempting to cook in the kitchen.

Bang.

Amber decided she might as well get up and wiped the sleep from her eyes. No sense staying in bed if she was alone. She popped out of bed and dressed quickly before padding down to the bathroom. As she closed her door, she was greeted by a bouncy and very energetic Kit.

"Mama's making breakfast." The little girl hugged her. "She's all better now. Thank you."

Amber bent down and scooped the girl up, twirling her around as she did. "I'm so happy your mama is better." She placed Kit on the floor and pointed to the bathroom. "I'll be right back to help Mama out with breakfast."

"She doesn't need help. Mama can do anything." With her hands on her hips, Kit was spunky to be sure.

"I'm sure she can." Amber leaned in conspiratorially and whispered, "I was just being polite." She was met by mass giggles. It was nice to have the house filled by more than just memories and clutter.

When Amber finally joined them in the kitchen, she was amazed. Not only did the aroma of pancakes greet her, but also empty counters and a cleared off table.

"It is so … clean."

"I woke early and thought it was the least I could do. I saw your file boxes and kind of went to town. I can show you what I did a bit later and can change it if you don't like it." Mariah was avoiding eye contact as she spoke.

"I'm impressed." Mariah looked up, now sporting a huge smile. "I've been trying to figure out how to get this all done for far too long. Thank you."

"Can I eat now, Mama?" Kit was practically bouncing in front of her mom.

"Sure. Amber, how many would you like?"

"Three, please."

They smelled delicious, but Amber's mind was really focused elsewhere. "Where did Jason go?"

"Uncle Jason said it was a surprise and to distract you with food."

Jason opened the front door and walked in just as she finished her sentence. "Shhhhh, don't give away all my tactics, little one," Jason teased as he went and hugged his niece. "Now I need to come up with a new means of distracting her in the future," he faux whispered.

He is going to be a great dad one day.

Amber looked around to see a wink from Mariah. She was a very powerful young witch if she could communicate that clearly from across the room.

"So, where were you that you needed to distract me with pancakes?" Amber was sure her face was bright red from the father comment. Not that Mariah was wrong; he really would be.

"I was checking out your motorcycle. It's actually a pretty good machine. I can have it fixed with only a few parts." He smiled at her expression. Her mouth was hanging open, like a fool.

"You fix motorcycles?"

Jason closed the gap between them and brought his lips to her ear, "I'm full of surprises." Darn man had her thinking inappropriate thoughts in a place where she should not.

"Mama says secrets are bad."

Amber burst out laughing and was immediately joined by Jason and Mariah.

"Your mama's right, little one. No more secrets." He rubbed her head before grabbing two proffered plates of pancakes. "Let's eat. There's much to decide."

The pancakes were delicious. It felt so right having the four of them squeezed at the table that had only ever held two. Amber knew Jason was going to ask them to stay, and she really hoped they would. He went into their story from the evening before, leaving out details that were not meant for young ears. From the glint in Mariah's eyes, she knew very well what was left out. After Kit left to draw on the front porch, Jason jumped in with both feet.

"So, what I said to them about you moving here, what do you think?" Jason asked point blank.

"Are you asking us to stay?" Mariah was hesitant in her question, and Amber grabbed her hand to comfort the young woman.

"We would love it if you stayed." It was amazing to hear Jason saying *we*.

"What would I do for your business?"

"Honestly," he began, "nothing." Mariah's smile fell.

"I need to do my share if I'm going to stay."

Amber could see where Kit got her posturing. "I actually was hoping you would help with *my* business." Jason winked as Amber offered. That had been his plan all along.

"Healing?" Mariah seemed to be trying it out for size. "I don't know much about it. Just what I learned growing up."

"Did you see what you did in a few hours this morning?" Amber gestured around the room. "You got things back on track faster than I could have. If we work together, I bet we can make enough money at this to add an addition to the cabin so you and Kit can have more room." As she talked, a plan just fell into place and out of her mouth. It felt so right.

"Actually," Jason interrupted. "I had a different plan in mind."

"And that plan would be?" Amber thought she had his end game worked out.

"I would like to build a second cabin for you two." Amber was wrong. She had zero clues as to what he was working toward. "And I want to add onto this one. We need a better bathroom." Darn man winked at her. Not that he was wrong. They really did.

"Or …" Mariah pulled Amber from her thoughts which was good because they were quickly spiraling to the realm of naughtydom, and this was not the time.

"Or?" Jason encouraged.

"Or you can build a new cabin for you and *your jaguar* and can add a second kitchen in there for the business." Amber could almost see the wheels turning in Mariah's mind. She was going to jump into this with both feet. "Then you wouldn't have to remodel this place."

"I like that idea." Jason seemed to really be pleased by that idea. He started to gather the dirty plates as if it were a done deal.

"That will cost more money." He set the plates down as Amber spoke.

"How about this …" Jason pulled out a paper from his back pocket and unfolded it. "This is the deed to the property. I already signed it over to you." When had he done that? "Town hall opens early —" He smirked back at her. What time did he get up to look at her motorcycle and sign over property?

"Can they just do that?" It sounded fishy to Amber, but what did she know about property transactions.

"No, not really, but I started the process." He slid it over. "Now, let me finish, woman." Mariah grabbed the stacked plates and chuckled as she deposited them into the kitchen. "What I was trying to say was, go with my plan. If you find it isn't working for you, you can either sell me your land and this house or kick us out." Amber knew she would never do either, but it felt so fast that it was nice to be offered an out. "It's what Rosemary would've wanted." He'd gone in for the kill. She loved Rosemary more than her own family; of course she would want to honor her wishes.

"Doesn't change the fact that it would cost a lot more money." She was being stubborn, but so be it.

"It would probably cost less," Mariah offered before pushing in her chair. "I need to go check on Kit." As she reached the door and turned to add, "We are staying by the way. I have plans for this business. Big plans." She closed the door behind her.

"I think you created a monster," Jason joked. "Seriously though, I have money."

"I know." Amber skootched her seat closer to him, but finding it not close enough, opting to sit on his lap instead. "It just feels like a huge move to make with someone you met only a day ago." She laid her head on his shoulder.

"It feels right though." He pulled her in even closer.

"It does." Nothing had felt more right in her life.

"So we're in agreement?"

"We are." Before she could elaborate and add in all the monetary conditions she wanted to put into place, he began kissing and nibbling her neck and all thoughts were lost. "Not playing fair," she groaned between kisses.

"Not playing. Kissing." With that he took her lips only to be interrupted almost immediately by a running Kit.

"Sorry, I have to go potty." She was at the bathroom quick as a whip.

"Sorry guys, she really had to go."

"No worries. We're done *negotiating*." She climbed back into her seat as Jason spoke. "We'll be following your plan. Having a kitchen just for the business with office space attached seems like the best plan."

"Your jaguar is going to be happy," Kit sang as she came in.

"What are you singing?" Jason asked what Amber was thinking.

"Oh, I was just singing about Aunt Amber's jaguar. She's going to be happy. She's been hiding for so many years and wants to come out." Kit just spoke as if she was saying what everyone else

already knew.

"She knows things." Mariah took her daughters hand. "But she knows better than to let everyone else know about it, though. Don't you, Kit?"

"Mama, that's why I was singing, and then people think it's a song."

"We've been over this." Mariah exhales with exacerbation. "People think it's creepy, not a song."

"Sorry, Mama."

"Don't be sorry. We're all family." Jason gave her a warm smile and nod as Amber spoke. "But your mama's right. Best to only do that here."

"What else do you know about my mate's jaguar?" Jason added, much to Amber's shock.

"Mate?" She liked the taste of the word, as unexpected as it was.

"Soon to be mate?" His shy tone, not fooling anyone. He had already decided she was his and that suited her just fine. Who cares what the rest of the world thought about it? When you know, you know.

"Fair enough." She wasn't going to argue since everyone there knew it to be true, as crazy as it was. Even if "mate" was an antiquated term.

"What can I say? I'm an old fashioned guy." He shrugged his shoulders before turning back to the young girl and kneeling to be eye level with her. "So, back to the question at hand. Kit, do you know anything else about her jaguar?"

Kit looked to her mother who gave her a nod of approval. "She was told to hide when Amber was a baby. The witch told her that Amber needed to be alone for a while." Amber's head was spinning. If it had been an adult throwing this at her, she would have been interrogating the daylights out of her, but the girl was five; Amber knew enough about kids to know that they would shut down if she pushed too hard.

"Do you know why?" Jason seemed to get kids, too. Mariah was right, he would be an amazing dad one day.

"It doesn't make sense, Mama." Kit looked back to her mom for support and was met with a warm smile.

"That is okay, honey, say it anyway," Mariah encouraged.

"She needed to be alone to learn her true gift." Kit shrugged her shoulders.

"Thanks, Kit. I'm glad you told me." The naïve girl looked far too worried for a person so young. Whatever Kit's gift was, it was powerful. "I was thinking I was broken," Amber confessed, opening her arms to invite Kit in for a hug.

"Not broken," Kit confirmed as she entered the embrace. "She's happy now and will come out to play more. She just is shy from hiding for so long." Amber could feel the truth to these words.

"Mama, can I go back outside?" Kit was done with grown-up time, and who could blame her?

"Absolutely, sweetheart. In a little bit we will do something fun. Deal?"

"Deal, Mama." And with that the girl scampered off.

"So, now you see what I have been hiding." Mariah fell to the floor with her back against the cabinet. "She is very powerful and can communicate even better than I can."

"You mean the way you speak in my head?" If Jason was shocked by Amber's statement, he was schooling himself well.

"Yes, she can do that, but oh, so much more." Mariah examined their faces and Amber joined them on the ground. What a sight it would be to see the three of them all sitting on the floor looking so serious. "I can only communicate that way with shifters and other witches and wizards, and they have

to be very powerful to even do that. Kit. Well, Kit can communicate with a shifters' animal, if they take animal form. She can also talk to humans." She mumbled the last part.

"She's never accidentally shared with me," Jason offered. "I bet she can control it much better than any other five year old would be able to."

"She really is amazing." Mariah sat a little higher as she spoke. "We'll probably never know for sure who the witch, who in essence bound your jaguar, but maybe if you tell me where you are from I could give a guess."

"No need. I think I already know." Amber had not thought of her "aunt" in many years. "My mom had a very powerful witch as a best friend almost all of my childhood. I would venture it was her. When my mom used to get all worried about fixing me, it was Aunt Ruby who talked her down. In hind sight, it all makes sense."

"Should we call her?" Mariah seemed to want answers as much as she did.

"She passed when I was a teen." She still thought of the woman often, and if she told her jaguar to back down, the reason was legit. She couldn't even bring herself to be mad. "If she felt it needed to happen this way, she had a reason. Look at all it brought me."

Amber looked to the two people sitting on the floor beside her and quickly glanced at the door.

"A sexy new beau?"

"Well, there it that." She scooted closer to Jason, grabbing his hand. "But it brought me so much more. I have a calling to heal, a new business partner, a family," Mariah reached out and touched her knee at the word family, "and yeah, you're not a too shabby part of the deal." Amber leaned into Jason, who in return kissed her head.

"So we're really going to do this," Mariah said matter of factly as she rose. "In that case I best tell Kit. She just asked me if we had to move again. Poor thing thought you would freak out about her abilities."

"Hey, Kit!" Jason shouted to the door.

"Yes, Uncle Jason." The girl bounced in, a smile on her face.

"What color do you want your room?" Kit barreled into both Amber and Jason in reply. No other words were needed.

Three Months Later

"Well, what do you think?"

"What do I think?" Amber couldn't believe the home he'd just shown her. For the past two months he had a crew building the cabin. She, of course, knew what the outside looked like and he had her work directly with the contractors about the business part of the home, but all else was kept a secret. The man was a vault. She had tried all of her wiles to get him to let her know what he had planned for their home, to no avail.

In the time since they first met, the lust that drove them together initially only grew stronger. That wasn't even the best part as far as Amber was concerned. No, the best part was the ever growing strength of their friendship. He really was meant for her. Amber had always wished that true fated mates had existed like in the novels she loved so much. She'd been wrong. What she wished for was exactly what she had with the man beside her. The one now walking side by side with her during this journey she called life.

Her jaguar couldn't agree more. She was pretty much always at the forefront now, and not just during the time of carnal fun. It was a comfort to have her there and something Amber was still getting used to. She still disappeared while Amber worked on her healing work, which was probably for the best since she tapped into a different part of her then. Mariah guessed that somewhere in her genealogy was a "pretty freakin' strong ass witch."

"So. Are you going to keep me waiting?" Jason sounded nervous. It was so un-Jason like and frankly, quite endearing.

"I absolutely love the house."

"And?" She knew what he wanted to know and was enjoying making him fuss the way he had made her squirm over the past month of construction.

"And I think this room is the perfect nursery, too." He swept her into his arms and began to twirl her around.

"Put me down. I am too big for that." She smacked his arm in faux protest.

"Hardly. I find you deliciously perfect." He had shown her over and over again how true that was over the past few months. He loved every one of her abundant curves.

"Okay," Amber conceded. "Maybe I am not too big *now*, but in about eight months I will be." Instead of putting her down, he held her even tighter.

"Really?" he gasped, awe filling his voice.

"Yes. Really." His eyes sparkled as they met hers, confirming to Amber that he was every bit as excited as she was.

"We did it wrong, you know." The quirk in his eye told her otherwise.

"On the contrary, according to the little stick I peed on we did it very right," she goaded as he

placed her on the floor.

"Not that, love. I know we did *that* right." He winked, and she leaned up to give him a quick kiss. "I meant we aren't mated yet."

The subject of mating had come up numerous times, and each and every one, conversation ended with them agreeing to wait until they were settled into their new life. Life was hardly settled, considering they were living in a cramped cabin waiting for their home to be completed, but the timing felt right. The house was finally done and ready for them to move in, and she was far more than ready.

"I think we can remedy that." She leaned in for another kiss, which he ended far too quickly for her liking.

"So does that mean you are going to bite *me*?" The huskiness of his voice had her wanting to do just that, right there in the empty room still filled with construction dust.

"Only if you're good … or bad." The exaggerated wink she gave him probably looked silly, but she had yet to master the sexiness he could portray in the gesture. "I've yet to decide."

"Minx."

"Your minx." Amber grabbed his hand, unsure of why they were not getting right to the mating.

"*Mine*." Jason kissed her thoroughly and she was out of breath when he finally pulled away. Oh goodness gracious why had he pulled away? "You know how you have been pestering me about how unicorns mate?"

"Yes." It had been driving her crazy." "You, my unicorn, are like a vault."

"Well …" Jason dropped to one knee, a box in his hand. Not only was he a vault, her was a magician. "This is how." Amber just stood there, staring at the handsome man before her as her eyes filled with tears. She had spent most of her life beyond lonely, and now she had her jaguar, a business partner, an intelligent and powerful niece, a baby on the way and this amazing man who was now kneeling before her. If this was a dream, she wanted to stay asleep forever. "From the day we met I knew we were meant to be together, and each and every day since has only strengthened that knowledge. Will you do me the amazing honor of being my wife?"

"Yes." Her eyes blurred with tears. "Yes." She knelt to meet his height, grabbing his face with both hands. "Yes." She kissed him, pouring every ounce of emotion she could into the kiss. She needed him to feel what her words couldn't say.

"Is that a yes?" He spoke with shallow breath when the kiss broke. "You haven't even looked at the ring yet. It might be from a gumball machine." He held the ring in front of her so she couldn't miss it. It was beautiful. She had no idea what the stone was, but it matched his eyes perfectly.

"That is a yes. Even *if* it were from a machine." Leaning in she kissed the spot below his ear. "This is where I'm going to bite you."

"I hope you meant, 'This is where I am going to bite you *now*.'" The lust in the air was so heavy in that moment, she wasn't sure if waiting were even an option. Good thing she didn't have to find out.

"I think I can arrange that."

And arrange that she did.

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About the Author

Filled with the desire to write books she wouldn't want her mama to know she read, much less wrote, Ever Coming was born. Ever Coming is the naughty pen name of an international best selling author who simply wanted to get her smut on. When she is not reading and writing the naughty, Ever is usually found enjoying time with her kids and husband. www.evercoming.com

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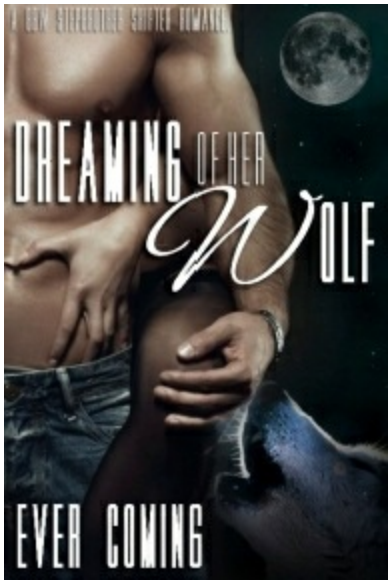

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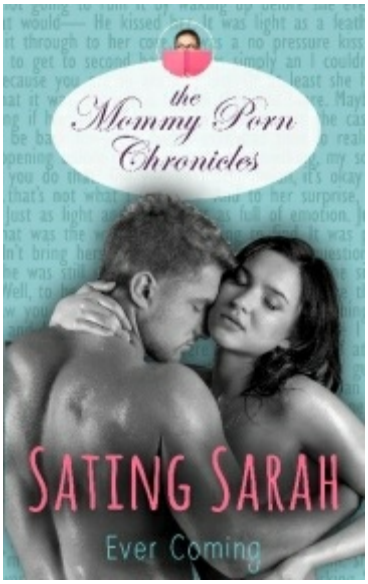

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If you loved Riding Her Unicorn, please enjoy this chapter of BLIND TRUST by Raci Ames, another sexy shifter book from the Woodland Creek series.

Smoke. It was everywhere. Gritty on her burning skin and dark in the air. Pia tried to see though it, looking for any light at all. Just seconds ago her entire world had burst with it - brighter and hotter than an explosion in a movie scene. She jumped from her bed, going towards the source until it had knocked her against the wall and prevented her from moving another inch. Terrified, she'd prayed for the glow to stop melting her eyes. And it had. The darkness set in. And she screamed.

The roar and the heat though, they'd stayed and increased along with a stabbing pain in her skull. She moved carefully, unsure which direction offered safety. Soon she bumped into a cool surface, virtual miracle in this inferno. Arms came around her and an unfamiliar voice deep with a Southern accent that didn't belong in this Illinois town, whispered to her.

"Calm down, I've got you. Just listen carefully," he said, slowly lifting her and cradling the petite brunette to his chest.

Pia nodded, feeling unreasonably safe, given the circumstances. She was dressed in the skimpiest of night clothes, and her compact curves captured his attention, pulling it from the life-threatening danger. He knew better than to get distracted by the female form, but in the case, he couldn't help it. All the experience under his belt couldn't compete with this needy beauty at the moment. But it had to.

He grabbed a robe from a hook by the door. It scalded his hand and he wrapped it around them he looked for another way out.

Pushing his charge around his side, he found a metal candlestick on the dresser, and carefully bashed the window. Glass exploded everywhere, slicing their skin in spite of his efforts to protect them both. Quickly, he gathered blankets from the bed and tossed them on the ground. It wasn't a far fall, but the woman, was passed out and incapable of making the jump.

He threw a leg across the windowsill and gathered the girl into his lap, said a little prayer to the saints his mother believed in so passionately and jumped. Rolling carefully in the air, he aimed properly so that her light form landed on him, jarring his hip into the cold ground. She shivered in the frosty air but didn't wake up. They were both covered with scratches and tears as their blood mingled. The symbolism of saving her life and becoming connected at this elemental level wasn't lost on him, but still. It wasn't enough to make him stay with the sounds of sirens echoing on the small side street.

He moved further from the blast, around to the side of the house. He wrapped the robe and the blanket around her, laying her down out of the path of danger and in the path of any of the first responders. Kissing her forehead for luck, he ran back into the woods and changed back to what he'd come to think of as his natural form.

She sat sunning herself on the small deck. The frequency of the high-pitched squeak of the swing hit the very back of my ears. It hurt, and in a way he knew he'd feel it for hours afterwards. But still, he could not walk away. These short glimpses of her were what he lived for these days, especially moments like these when she was content. They were few and far between. Today he'd timed this particular pass by with the arrival of her mother's car. The unmistakable purr of the Jaguar reached him on the far side of their property where he'd made a small den.

Inevitably, her mother would come home and there would often be shouting, and sometimes crying. That was the worst. It made him wonder if her life had been worth saving. Made him worry if she, like him, felt more despondent than hopeful, more raw than healed. He hadn't been injured in the fire. Not permanently. His burns had healed but his hatred for humanity had grown. And especially his hatred for anything that was out to hurt her, including her family. He creeped enough to know the pressure they put on her before the fire, and what they did now.

He would feel just awful about it, he should feel awful about it. But he couldn't. Because everyone once in a while, she would come

outside and smile. Sometimes it was the sun, or a melody of a bird. And sometimes, he was sure she could feel his stare, and that she smiled at him. It almost made him want to shift, just for a chance to talk to her again. But he couldn't shift into a man again. Not for her. Not for anyone.

But if there was any way for him to help her, in his wolf form, the he would stop at nothing to help her get the happiness she deserved.

The door opened without a knock, and Pia turned her face to the sound. Her parents didn't dare to enter that way any more. Which could only mean one person.

"It's me. Jesus, Pia, it's only been three weeks" the short raven-haired girl said, accepting the hug. Pia grabbed around her neck and hung on, and not for the first time, Cori recognized how different her friend was. In some ways, it was a good thing. Pia had always been so reserved, almost standoffish. They'd been friends long enough that Cori knew Pia held back because she was shy. But she also knew that it stopped her friend a little bit from fully enjoying life. That's why Cori felt especially bad about the accident. And that's why she was going to do everything she could to help during the short time she had back in town.

"I know. I'm just happy to see you, is all," Pia said, catching herself on the words. Cori smiled sadly and tightened her grip. "You're supposed to laugh," Pia said, sighing when her joke fell flat.

"I did. Silently. I'll do better next time," Cori said, shocked at the difference in her friend during the short time she'd been gone. She sighed at the sight of Pia in the bed.

"I heard that," Pia said. And of course she had - her other senses were better since the accident but they didn't come close to making up for her eyes.

Pia could actually feel Cori's disappointment. When they'd parted only a couple of weeks ago, Pia had been getting up and dressed and walking around for the better part of each day. Now she was mushed under the covers with a messy ponytail on top of her head.

She steeled her emotions and shut out the guilt that crept in after Cori had worked so hard to help her.

"I knew I shouldn't have left you alone," Cori said, sterling her voice and gripping Pia's shoulders tightly to stare. Her voice choked on the words and when the hug came Pia felt moisture on her shirt from Cori's silent tears.

"Stop. I was never going to let you skip your trip to Europe. You've worked too hard for that."

"I could've gone some other time," Cori said, brushing a wisp of hair away from Pia's mouth. Dry lips and dry skin were yet another indication about how little the girl had taken care of herself.

"We've been over this. And besides, it's not like I was alone. I had the maid," Pia said wryly, just a few seconds before the referenced help came to collect the mug and plate by her bed.

"M' sorry ma'am," the woman whispered, apologizing for no reason.

"Pia. Please. Ma'am is for my mother."

"Y-y-yes Miss," the woman said, not changing tactics very much before scrambling towards the door. "I'll come by to clean in an hour," she said before heading out.

"Hey, no, she's supposed to be doing that for herself," Cori objected.

Pia laughed dryly and rolled her blind eyes. "Like that's going to happen. My mother won't tolerate the mess. And let's face it, I was helpless at housework, even when I could see."

"You need to learn it if you want to get your independence and move out," Cori said, looking around the room. Every surface was empty, identical, and white. Cori wanted to think that Pia knew where everything was in her drawers, but she doubted it.

"Didn't the home transition team come and help get you set up?" Cori asked. She'd checked in at the center and they said that they had.

"Yes. But I broke too much crystal and china and mother dearest said they had to go," Pia said. Her mother had panicked over the smallest cut when Pia had tried to help clean up the mess and sent the training staff from the Center for the Blind away. Instead she'd bought every gadget they'd recommended and hired the maid instead.

"So buy plastic!" Cori said, knowing as well as Pia did that would never fly in the Matthews household.

"Yeah right. Can we forget about my mom for a few minutes? I get enough of her. Tell me everything about your trip instead," Pia said, working to keep the hopeless out of her voice. Her mother didn't want to accept that Pia's condition was permanent. Neither did Pia, but she didn't have much of a choice.

"I'll tell you everything. On a walk. But you need to shower first. C'mon, I'll help you," Cori said, standing up and helping Pia from the bed.

The first time Cori had helped Pia in the shower had been more than a little awkward. They'd been friends for years, going through college and medical school together. But that had gone beyond the comfort zone of their bond, for Pia at least. Cori was used to it, but then again she actually worked with patients. Pia just brought them in. She gave up being a doctor after a horrifying ER residency. She'd driven an ambulance and served as an EMT instead, and loved it. She missed it now almost more than she missed her sight.

"Isn't that better?" Cori asked, tucking Pia's arm in hers, and handing the walking stick to her friend. And it did. Pia knew that already. In the six months since the fire, she'd learned to appreciate little things like being clean and going outside. When she'd been at the rehabilitation center, they were ways to test her independence. But in the weeks she'd been at home, she had done very little of either. Her mother made her feel so helpless and she hated it.

"I need to get out of there," Pia said, working to find the door handle on her own, just to prove to Cori, and to herself that she could.

"Exactly. That's why we're going on a walk," Cori said, happier to see this side of Pia than the girl who'd been sulking in bed when she arrived.

"No. I need to be out of there for good. I had talked them into it just before the fire," Pia said sadly. She was twenty-six and far too old to be living in her parents house. They kept her there for years under the guise of house sitting. But now that her work and her identity had been taken away, she needed something for herself, something more than a newly fixed up and professionally decorated guest suite.

All of her belongings, her clothes, her memories, had burned in the fire. Her mother had rebuilt the rooms, and replaced everything before Pia even left the hospital. She knew how fortunate she was that materially she needed nothing. But those were all just things, and mattered very little when she didn't have any kind of a life left.

"I still wake up choking on smoke. I can still smell it," Pia said, opening the door and taking in the warm air. "Getting away from it is the only reason I come outside anymore."

"We'll get you out of here. I'll figure it out," Cori said, silently promising to herself to make it happen.

Pia knew there were just a couple steps from her front door to her patio, and managed that on her own, taking refuge on the patio furniture when the rooms got to be too much. She'd even slept there a few times. But then there were more steps to deal with and those were harder for her.

"C'mon. Use the cane like we showed you," Cori said, adjusting Pia's grip and waiting until the tip was steady on the ground.

Pia moved her foot cautiously, navigating the flat surface. The second step sent her tumbling over the cane.

"God damnit! I hate this thing," Pia yelled, throwing the offensive stick on the ground.

"It's hard. You're learning how to walk again. But c'mon. Get up." Cori was sympathetic but not about to let her friend quite. "Try the stairs with your hands on the rails and just use your feet. There are five steps."

Before the fire, or BTF as Pia thought of it in her lighter moments, she would have said she could get around her parents property with her eyes closed. Now that she was blind, that couldn't have been further from the truth.

She got down the first three steps just fine. But then misplaced her foot on the fourth one, falling forward in to a warm pile of fur.

"What? What the hell?" Pia yelled, heart beating twenty times faster than it should have been. She had expected to fall flat on her face but somehow she hadn't. She grabbed at the fur, but it moved beneath her, gently freeing itself and running away.

"Oh my god Pia. Are you ok???" Cori said, running down the stairs.

"Fine," Pia said, rubbing at her wrist. That had been the only thing to hit ground. "Somehow. What even was that?" she asked, listening for footsteps and hearing nothing.

"I don't know. Some sort of dog, I think. It came out of nowhere. And then disappeared." Cori offered a hand to help her up and Pia grabbed it.

"A dog?" Pia asked, confused. They didn't have dogs on the property. Her mother claimed allergies, but Pia knew it was just because they were messy.

"A big one. It was reddish, I think. It moved so fast I barely saw it." Cori grabbed her friends hand and investigated. "Just a scrape. You're good. Let's go in a wash it off."

"No. I don't want to go inside right now. There's a sink by the garden. Let's go there, and then go for that walk. Clearly I need the practice," Pia managed to joke.

Cori smiled and grabbed her elbow, tucking their arms. "You worry about your feet. I'll take care of everything else. Like a guide dog," Cori said, giggling.

"I put myself on the list for one," Pia said, as they moved towards the garden.

"You did? I thought your mother said no way?" Cori cleaned the cut carefully, pleased to see there wasn't any blood under the dirt. A guide dog was just one of the many things she had fought with Mrs. Matthews about since Pia had gone blind.

"She did. I figured it might get me out of the house," Pia smirked. "Unfortunately it takes months to come up on the list. I even dropped your name. It didn't help," Pia said.

"Why would you think it would?" Cori said, winding around the path of roses just starting to bloom. The Matthews had won awards for them for generations.

"You work a the rehab center? You're a doctor? I don't know. I even talked my dad into making a donation, even though I didn't tell him why. That didn't help either," Pia said, getting into the rhythm of Cori's step.

"And knowing you that made you love the organization, and now you want one even more. Am I right?" Cori asked. "Garden or woods?"

"Woods. My running trail please," Pia said with a sigh. She hadn't been on it months.

"You can run you know," Cori said, taking them across the clearing and into the place where the trees split. She wasn't a runner like Pia but they'd hiked along the trail enough on visits before the fire.

"Yeah. On the treadmill," Pia said. "You know how much I hate that."

"It might be better than nothing," Cori said.

"But not better than a guide dog."

"True. There are some private facilities that I've heard about. I'll put out some feelers, see what I can do."

Want to read more from BLIND TRUST by Raci Ames? It's available as of November 12 from Amazon

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